

**“Dear! How tiresome it must be to be so religious! [...] and where’s the use of it?”
Religious Identity and the Empowerment of Femininity in Mary Martha Sherwood’s *The Fairchild Family* (1818) and *The Rose: A Fairy Tale* (1821) (1).**

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<1> Mary Martha Sherwood (1775-1851), staunch Evangelist and moral crusader, was a prolific writer of strongly didactic stories that were intended as educational tools both for children and for those who looked after them. Belonging to the increasing band of writers who offered advice to others, her religious homilies extolled the benefits that might accrue to her readers in the hereafter if they lived a modest and saintly life whilst in the here and now. Living a modest and saintly life was also seen by society as the acme of female existence, ensuring both a woman’s good reputation now and her future reward amongst the angels and this was an important consideration for readers and writers alike because, during the Regency, Georgian and Victorian periods when Sherwood was writing, a woman’s reputation was deemed to be a major part of her identity.

<2> A ‘good’ reputation however, was usually based on nothing more than a woman being able to conform to ‘ladylike’ notions of femininity. These were based primarily on patriarchal expectations and societal limitations and if a woman’s femininity was compromised in any way by behavior that did not conform to an accepted norm, then her good name would be besmirched and her identity forever tarnished. Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) is a prime example of what could happen to a woman who did not conform to acceptable notions of femininity. She wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) as a riposte to Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the French Revolution* (1790), but it was her feminist polemic *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), that garnered most notoriety (Wollstonecraft 11). This plea for women’s rights was shocking to some, including Horace Walpole who called her “a hyena in petticoats” and Richard Polwhele, who publicly lampooned her in *The Unsex’d Female* (1798), but it wasn’t just men who were affronted by what she had to say as an appalled Hannah More vowed that she would *never* read the *Vindication* (Wollstonecraft 13). Yet if her writing offended some, then her uncompromising private life shocked nearly everyone. Her affair with Gilbert Imlay and the subsequent birth of Fanny alienated her from polite society and she became almost a pariah for the short time that she lived and other women were thus disinclined to use her as their role model.

<3> The paradox for writers of didactic literature, therefore, was how best to educate young women into winning the respect of a patriarchal society without losing their own self-respect in the process. Sherwood was no Wollstonecraftian feminist, but this essay argues that some, if not perhaps all of her narratives, do offer girls the possibility of empowering their own femininity if

they allow moral and religious instruction to influence their behavior. In order to teach young girls to value femininity and to recognize the difference between applied artifice and true worth, writers of didactic literature often represented the one as negative and demeaning, the other as positive and empowering, with these states being not unrelated to the more traditional concepts of 'good' and 'evil'. It was Wollstonecraft who had written in the *Vindication*, that women "have been stripped of the virtues that should clothe humanity, they have been decked [instead] with artificial graces" imposed by a patriarchal society which tended to view femininity as a purely physical (sexual) condition (Wollstonecraft 122). Moreover, the misogynistic perception of women as mental, physical and spiritual weaklings was a useful tool for propping up the idea of male superiority and published tracts were essential in disseminating such views.

<4> Inevitably, such views have had a lasting influence. Jane Rendall points out, for example, that the respected writer Montesquieu (1689-1755) showed "a profound contempt for female qualities" and that his writing promotes "the dual view of women as weak, gentle and soft on the one hand, on the other as frivolous, vain or irrational", both of which impressions did a lasting disservice to femininity (15). Nor was Montesquieu alone in his distaste of femininity. William Alexander was unequivocal in his views of women when he wrote in *The History of Women* (1782) that the "loss of virtue in women" leads to such a great depravity of mind that "it in time destroys every public virtue of the men" (vol.2, 10). Even some of the more enlightened views on female education expressed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) stung Wollstonecraft into challenging his attitudes in the *Vindication*. He had written in his seminal work *Emile* (1762) that women "should be robust for men, so that men born from them will be robust too" and he said that all girls should be educated to appreciate their 'natural' roles as wives and mothers (336). However, as Jacqueline M. Labbe has argued, this could possibly be seen not as a metaphor for the restriction of women (as is most common) but as a "cleansing" metaphor which helps to transform them "from whore to angel" and which, she suggests, was the precursor of the Victorian adulation of the angel in the house and the redemptive image of the mother as Madonna (para. 8). Of course, Rousseau promotes the kind of femininity that is of most use to men and this is where Wollstonecraft takes issue with him. As she writes in the *Vindication*, the mother who "wishes to give true dignity of character to her daughter must [...] proceed on a plan diametrically opposite to that which Rousseau has recommended" and she warns that his eloquence and influence "renders absurdities possible" to those who, unlike herself, "have not the ability to refute them" (Wollstonecraft 128). These then were some of the prevailing attitudes inherited by Sherwood and they needed challenging and addressing, but perhaps with a more subtle approach than the one espoused by Wollstonecraft. Since didactic literature was a popular medium for educating and enlightening the next generation, it became a useful genre for promoting a more empowered kind of femininity, the kind that is based on religious teaching rather than sexual stereotype. In the following pages therefore, and with Wollstonecraft's influence in mind, two apparently different stories written by Sherwood show how she carefully took up the literary baton proffered by Wollstonecraft - the woman now regarded as the first modern feminist - and used it to subtly weave her own spiritually empowering notions of femininity into narratives written primarily for children.

<5> Those narratives are her better-known *The History of the Fairchild Family* (1818) and *The Rose: A Fairy Tale* (1821), both of which were written during her most Evangelical period. *The Fairchild Family* was both popular and influential, despite Percy Muir's comment that no child

would ever get “beyond the introduction” if it had the choice (88). The Victorian author Mary Louisa Molesworth (1839-1921) rather refutes this notion by claiming that, as a child, she soon had the measure of Sherwood’s books and read all the sermons and prayers first to get them out of the way so that she could settle down to enjoying the stories at her leisure (Avery, *Children’s Patterns* 85). In fact, Sherwood’s narrative was still being read well into the Edwardian era.

(2) Similarly, *The Rose*, although it seems a rather unusual departure into the realms of fancy for such a strongly didactic writer as Sherwood, it nevertheless promotes feminine virtue as a highly desirable concept, especially when it is closely allied to spiritual and moral excellence. Although her female characters tend to remain conventionally feminine throughout her narratives, Sherwood illustrates that ‘true’ femininity is a construct, not of societal and patriarchal preference, but of religious and moral teaching and it is therefore much more ‘virtuous’ as a result. This subtle difference in emphasis, whilst accentuating Sherwood’s belief in the power of religious education to change people for the better, also elevates her female characters to a more empowered and respectable level so that they might then be regarded as influential and attractive role models for the young reader.

<6> Didacticism, of course, was not confined just to children’s books; according to Avery, “it was the spirit of the period, the official creed of authors, critics and public” (*Nineteenth Century Children* 13). By about 1780 the professional writer of children’s literature had come to the fore and, as with the writing of novels, it was women who were in the majority. However, the concept of children’s literature was much more fluid until about 1839 when Sinclair produced the innovative *Holiday House*, a narrative that was clearly designed to appeal directly to children. Peter Hunt calls it a “landmark” text for the ways in which it helps to change the focus of children’s literature (31). Whilst women like Sherwood were also prolific writers in other fields and were highly regarded in their day, very few of them have been remembered for their children’s literature, with their style of writing – didacticism – rather falling out of favor and they with it.

<7> Yet such was the impact of female-authored didactic literature that, in 1802, Charles Lamb (1775-1834) felt moved to write to S.T. Coleridge to protest against their increasing influence. He refers to writers of didactic narratives as the “cursed Barbauld crew”, seeing them as women who deliberately shunned imaginative writing in favor of dull, prosaic facts and who, as a result, made reading a chore rather than a pleasure.(3) Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743-1825) was another well-respected author but, as Norma Clarke notes, once the passing on of “useful knowledge” had become synonymous with all that was “dry, inhuman and dreary”, the names of this once popular Barbauld crew soon fell into obscurity and Barbauld became caricatured as a “witch bent not on nurture but destruction” (Clarke 92). Also, as Valerie Sanders notes, a worrying trend emerged during the early to mid-nineteenth century whereby several female anti-feminist critics began to actively “applaud the negative virtues available to women”, seeing them as “far more honourable than the active ones”, and she quotes Mary Shelley and Elizabeth Rigby as being particularly guilty of this tendency (22). She goes on to say however, that, by the 1830s and 1840s, the tide was possibly turning since many women writers seemed “ashamed of the low reputation of their own sex”, and so “urged their readers to help repair their battered image” (23). Yet through the genre of children’s literature which, first and foremost was an educational tool, writers such as Sherwood, who were neither feminist nor anti-feminist, created narratives that helped and encouraged readers to repair this battered image of femininity. They did this by

changing the stereotypical depictions of passive, weak-willed femininity into something more active, 'heroic' even, whereby female characters acted as encouraging role models for a strong-minded and full-bodied femininity. This was not some concerted literary or feminist movement wishing to overthrow established attitudes but a 'thinking woman's revolution' through which other possibilities, other ways of being feminine, were being presented.

<8> Traditionally, the feminine woman was the one who married and raised children and intellectuals like Wollstonecraft and her fellow Bluestockings, who openly chose a different path, were therefore not considered to be feminine. Cultural ideology dictated that the feminine woman (later enshrined as 'the angel in the house' by Coventry Patmore) was meek, subservient, domesticated and dependent and the idea that she could be both strong-minded as well as feminine was anathema to the smooth-working of a patriarchal society. Toril Moi has argued that while "feminist" and "female" are definite and recognizable terms, "femininity" is and should be a far more vague and much more fluid term (109), and U.C. Knoepfelmacher suggests that 'femininity' should be a plural noun because otherwise it becomes a problematic term (425). Whilst there is always an inherent danger in fixing meanings to femininity, rather than replace the given feminine traits with others, what Wollstonecraft and later writers such as Sherwood did, especially in their narratives for juveniles, was to expand the range of words and meanings associated with femininity so as to give a more nuanced understanding of its possibilities. For example, words such as pious, virtuous, and modest, when applied particularly to young women, were loaded with coded meanings that largely related to how a girl was presented for the marriage market. The meanings implicit within these words tended to denote sexual purity rather more than spiritual purity and the elevation of the pious, modest and sexually virtuous young woman as the ideal wife and mother reached its zenith during the high Victorian era.

<9> This was the time when the ideology of the loving mother (in literature at least) promoted the idea of her as a saintly being akin to the Virgin Mary and the virtuous wife, happy in her domesticity, was exalted by a patriarchal society as an "angel" in the house, possibly the highest accolade that could be bestowed upon a woman.(4) Jacqueline M. Labbe argues in "The Romance of Motherhood" that "to be a mother, visibly, during these decades was to declare one's propriety and virtue" but the fact that Mary and the angels have long been idealized as highly spiritual and asexual beings makes their appropriation as symbols of perfect womanhood an almost impossible goal for women to achieve and therefore they will always be found lacking (para.73). Although referring specifically to Wollstonecraft, Labbe suggests that intelligent women were quick to utilize this idealization of motherhood in their writing and Barbauld, Maria Edgeworth and Sherwood all saw that giving women a more achievable goal by means of literary role models both saintly and human was a way of empowering femininity by forcing a distinction between femininity that relies on flattery and frivolity and femininity that values spiritual excellence. In *The Feminine Irony*, however, Agress suggests that writers like Wollstonecraft, More and Edgeworth "simply projected society's views" without changing women's position within it and that as writers of influential texts they guided women "in performing their proper roles as subordinate creatures, as helpmeets to men" (174). Yet close reading of didactic narratives shows that, while they weren't perhaps looking to change a woman's position in society, they were trying to make her feel empowered within that position. As Nina Auerbach and U.C. Knoepfelmacher note, it was in women's best interests to appear to conform - at least outwardly - to the stereotypical (feminine) roles prescribed for them because

then they were rewarded rather than ostracized by society (Auerbach and Knoepfmacher 12-13). Wollstonecraft's stand against patriarchal power brought unwanted infamy to her name and other women were disinclined, therefore, to follow her lead. Yet the character of Mrs Mason, whom she creates for the *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788), is the very model of acceptable femininity and, under cover of this respectability, Wollstonecraft unobtrusively began to refine femininity into a more enlightened and empowered state.(5)

<10> Gillian Beer warns, however, that if gender (and femininity) is mainly a cultural product, then it is "risky" to place too much emphasis on the veracity of women's representations of women, "as if the gender of the writer makes them thereby automatically authoritative" (79). Such an assumption is dangerous, she argues, because it simplifies our understanding of the writing and encourages our "internalization of past gender construction" (79). Yet Sherwood, amongst others, is trying to prevent an internalization of gender construction by distancing femininity from its association with weakness (of body, of character, of purpose) through her fictional representations of women. As Wollstonecraft wrote in the *Vindication*, a pretty woman would always be considered "an object of desire" by men, but "a fine woman" who displays instead a more "intellectual beauty [...] may be overlooked or observed with indifference" (136). It is this gap between the two states of acceptable womanliness that Sherwood was intent on subtly closing.

<11> With the growing accessibility of printed matter and the popularity of cheaply sold chap books and religious tracts, reading became a relatively popular activity, although it was mainly wealthy people who were able to afford to buy books for their children, and enjoy having the leisure time to read to them. The popularity of tales such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Sarah Fielding's *The Governess, or Little Female Academy* (1749), and Sarah Trimmer's *Fabulous Histories* (1786), for example, brought an entirely new genre of educational narrative to a wider audience and by the time that the Grimm brothers had begun to revise their extremely popular collection of *Kinder und Hausmarchen Tales* (1812-15), for those who could afford to buy books and those who had the leisure time to read them, children's literature had become a vibrant mix of didacticism and fantasy with the genres sometimes merging, sometimes remaining deliberately apart.(6) They did usually share something in common, however, and that was the reflection of middle class ideology which tended to foreground the image of the close-knit family unit in an harmonious domestic setting as being a stabilizing and cohesive element for a society in flux. Such reference to a secure home life is found in Wollstonecraft's *Original Stories*, most of Barbauld's children's narratives, and also in those written by Edgeworth and Francis Bowyer Vaux.(1785-1854).

<12> The French Revolution was still uncomfortably close, both geographically and historically, and there was an all too real fear of both invasion from abroad and insurgency from within. Unity, stability and religious observance were the mainstays of many narratives and certainly *The Fairchild Family*, published soon after the end of the Napoleonic Wars, presents the philanthropic Fairchilds as a happy, close-knit, religious family who work, read and pray together and who take an active part in sustaining the small community in which they live.(7) The narrative is written in three parts - 1818, 1842, and 1847 - and the first book in the trilogy is stridently Evangelical, written when Sherwood was under the powerful influence of the Rev.

Henry Martyn, a charismatic Calvinist hell-fire preacher she met whilst in India.⁽⁸⁾ It is composed of several short stories through which she promulgates religious teaching as the marker of true spiritual enlightenment, using the Fairchild parents as a device for showing the beneficial effects of religious education on young people especially, on the family unit and on the community at large, and within each chapter there is a commonplace parable told to illuminate more esoteric moral and religious concepts.

<13> The matriarch of this family is Mrs. Fairchild and she is depicted as the exemplar of the virtuous middle-class wife and mother. She undertakes the traditional education of her girls and they are given the sort of education deemed suitable for girls of their class. Their religious education is firmly anchored in Evangelical fire and brimstone sermons but there are moments of levity to offset the rather harsh descriptions of death and damnation that tend to dominate the book and for which Sherwood is best remembered. The delightfully rural, middle-class home Sherwood envisions for this family – and which is lovingly re-created in some of her other stories such as *The Lady of the Manor* (1825-9) and *The Happy Family* (1838) - is shown as an intellectual space, a private, nurturing, domestic place in which prayer and contemplation help to enhance the spirit and inform the mind by turning them away from fripperies and flattery. The setting is significant because not only does it represent the antithesis of the smoky, industrialized towns that were fast encroaching on hamlet and village, but it also draws on the traditional feminine connection with Nature and nurture. As Raymond Williams notes, in his introduction to *Culture and Society* (1958), the phrase ‘the Industrial Revolution’, first coined by French writers in the 1820s and later adopted by English writers, was no misnomer for as the one had changed France for ever, so the other had forever changed England by forcing in “a new society” (xiv). Inevitably, fears about urbanization, the loss of the self-contained rural community and the insidious increase in state-controlled charity resulted in a literary backlash that rather extolled the rosy (middle class) ideology of the simple, rural life whilst ignoring some of its harsher realities.

<14> This nostalgic, Romantic outlook lasted well into the Victorian era and beyond and so, in the opening paragraph of *The Fairchild Family*, Sherwood situates the idea of the rural, domestic home and garden as a safe haven, a place of sanctuary, a feminized rural idyll inviolate against the masculinized and threatening urban sprawl. Both house and garden in turn are set in a beautiful, pre-lapsarian landscape which is feminized in the sense that it is presented as an abundant paradise full of good things that both nourish the body and regenerate the soul. The surrounding fields are but an extension of the garden (in the sense that the family has easy access to them) and the heavenly garden, of course, with its rich abundance of fruit, flowers and vegetables is also an extension of the domestic space that is most closely associated with Mrs. Fairchild, who is both mother and mother-goddess. It acts as a protective, maternal enclosure where Sherwood actively merges a reverence for God with a reverence for the natural world, suggesting the possibility of a more profoundly feminized spiritual experience without necessarily challenging existing beliefs. For instance, the narrator comments that “[m]any good people have liked to pray in the open air, where they can look up to the heavens, and around them upon the fairest of God’s works – trees and shrubs and brooks, green hills, and meadows, and flowery fields” (113). In placing her narrative within the family unit, as part of the domestic space that is home and garden in this way Sherwood, (although carefully working within the limits set down for feminine propriety), magnifies the feminine, nurturing, pastoral care of the mother-figure and in so doing, she gives Mrs. Fairchild her distinctive voice of authority. This

motif of the garden as a spiritual haven occurs repeatedly in Sherwood's narratives which suggests that this was something she felt strongly about.(9)

<15> Sherwood uses the character of the mother as the narrative voice throughout most of the book, conferring on her the authority of religious preacher since many of the tales she tells are in the first person narrative. Mrs. Fairchild appropriates the words of a preacher when she presents her sermons/stories to her children and yet the religious lessons she imparts are invested with the supposed personal experience of a loving mother. Sherwood rationalizes it in a sense, by making it both doctrinal and domestic at the same time. It may be the pastor's business to save souls using stories of eminent and godly men, but Sherwood changes the emphasis so that it becomes instead the domestic story of an eminent and godly woman who becomes the prospective saver of souls.

<16> Sherwood repeats this formula several times and, in a story she tells on the perils of jealousy, Mrs. Fairchild demonstrates how she overcomes a fit of all-consuming jealousy through an education that delivered her "from the slavery and bondage of it" so that "it does [not] make me miserable, as it used to do" (50). This same notion of being liberated from the "slavery and bondage" of uneducated behavior can also be read as a reference to freeing oneself from patriarchal constructions of femininity, and Sherwood suggests as much when she relates the sorry tale of the young Augusta Noble - a far darker tale which concerns the effects of frivolous femininity as much as the negation of spiritual values.

<17> Appropriating the idea of good and evil as opposing states of being in Augusta's story, Sherwood offers them to her readers as examples of femininity. If we can think of Mrs. Fairchild and her daughters as exemplifying the more noble principles of enlightened femininity, then the ironically named Lady Noble and her unfortunate daughter Augusta are used to represent the opposite. Depicted as being aware only of their own status in the world, these two females are described in the narrative as deliberately shunning spiritual excellence, preferring worldly pleasure and its more immediate rewards and, while ever she happily indulges in empty flattery and enjoys her scornful one-upmanship over others, Augusta's spiritual 'nobility' inevitably diminishes. Whilst Sherwood is obviously showing the differences between those who follow religious teaching and those who don't, she also argues the case for seeing femininity as a way of reflecting a woman's inner status (as opposed to her outward or social status). The young lady Augusta is described as proudly displaying many of the artificial elements of femininity that Wollstonecraft abhorred, thinking erroneously they make her superior to the Fairchild children. She despises the simple and straightforward Fairchild children when they come to visit, thinking them far beneath her and she scoffs at religious observance: "Dear! How tiresome it must be to be so religious! [...] and where's the use of it?" she asks, and Sherwood makes sure her wayward character soon finds out (97). Augusta, being "more conceited and full of herself than ever" after receiving many flattering compliments about her pretty appearance, is shown as being the very essence of femininity - devoid of any redeeming qualities (101). She demonstrates all the damaging effects of a femininity based solely on cultural, social and patriarchal approbation which rewards a girl for how she looks rather than who she is as a person. The flighty Augusta is all show and very little substance and we know it will all end badly for her. This girl and her brand of femininity come to a very nasty end with vanity as the implied cause of her sudden and

rather terrifying death in a fire. In a way, because she admires herself so much and will not listen to sound advice (from the ever-watchful Mrs. Fairchild), she is the cause of her own downfall. The beautiful and expensive gown that Augusta is gloatingly admiring in the mirror catches fire and “the unhappy young lady was so dreadfully burnt, that she never spoke afterwards, but died in agonies [that] night — a warning to all children.” (156) Harsh words maybe, but Sherwood intends none of her young readers to identify with this particular girl, for whatever reason.

<18> The fiery conflagration that engulfs Augusta is, of course, a metaphor for the everlasting torment and the eternal damnation of the wayward soul in hell, so prevalent in Calvinist preaching at the time, but the narrative’s annihilation of Augusta Noble in such a shocking way also acts as a warning to other girls on the perils of vanity. The narrator implies that if she had followed the Fairchild method of moral upbringing and religious education Augusta could so easily have lived up to her noble name. The reader is encouraged, therefore, to identify more with the example set by Mrs. Fairchild, the one female character who is allowed to reign supreme throughout the book as the noblest upholder of an empowered feminine virtue, tainted neither by artifice nor vanity.

<19> Although Sherwood’s fictional Fairchild family are mainly used as disseminators of religious instruction, they are also depicted as a cohesive unit in which love, charity, morality, respect, and religion, all play a vital part in putting forward positive ideas about femininity and the wider role it plays in both the family and in society. The contrast in the two opposing forms of femininity is also brought out in another tale where, like the Nobles, the three Crosbie ladies are described as totally self-centred, inconsiderate and vain, displaying between them most of the more unattractive traits of femininity which in turn bring disharmony to their family and displeasure to those around them. The narrator points out that fine clothes are no substitute for a fine nature and, underneath all their applied feminine finery and social veneer, the Crosbie ladies leave a great deal to be desired. Their constant bickering, the fuss over the food they eat, their vanity and ill-mannered outbursts, whilst amusing to read, suggest that these are women (and a girl) who are restricted by their own disillusionment. They are shown as being caught in the trap of a femininity which keeps them firmly imprisoned in a diminishing cycle of negativity. The message is that if the underlying nature is caught up with falsity and show — as it clearly is with these fine ladies — then spiritual and intellectual growth will be restricted. Sherwood’s oft-repeated warning is that the woman (or girl) who assumes that finery and affectation are the ultimate markers of femininity is self-deluded like Mrs. Crosbie, her daughter and her sister-in-law and is either doomed to a life of personal dissatisfaction or is possibly damned like Augusta Noble and her mother. As Sherwood is at pains to communicate, the kind of spiritual empowerment enjoyed by Mrs. Fairchild negates the attraction of the more artificially acquired and empty ‘virtues’ such as vanity, coquettishness, winsomeness, or false delicacy (all those culturally-imposed qualities, in fact, that are all too readily associated with the idea of femininity) and brings with it an increasing sense of self-worth and respect.

<20> Counterbalancing the depiction of Mrs. Fairchild as merely a religious cipher or someone who seems rather too saintly to be believable, there are allusions to the power she wields within the family unit and within the community at large. Her femininity shines like a beacon — as it is meant to do, of course, but as a character she is much more rounded than she at first appears.

Whilst she rigidly upholds many of Sherwood's extreme Calvinistic beliefs she is presented, much like Wollstonecraft's Mrs. Mason in her own story for children, as a rational (in the non-religious sense), moral teacher-figure who is keen for the next generation of women (here represented by her daughters) to benefit from a more enlightened education than the one she received. Within the conventional expectations of the day Mrs. Fairchild represents the acceptable face of a femininity that is grounded in spiritual and intellectual excellence. She is presented as an example of near-perfect femininity, since she is selfless, kind, spiritual, philanthropic and rational, and she is a powerful antithesis to many of the satirical descriptions of women that showed them only as vain, shallow, dependent and frivolous creatures.

<21> Although seeming not to challenge patriarchal dominance over the female body in terms of what women are allowed to do or be Sherwood, in *The Fairchild Family*, nonetheless suggests that spiritual and intellectual enlightenment is an empowering condition which privileges the predominantly feminine (and Christ-like) qualities of compassion, modesty, humility and virtue. Mrs. Fairchild occupies the role of loving wife and mother without question, but Sherwood shows the influence a mother can have – for good or ill – on the next generation of women and she imbues Mrs. Fairchild with all the qualities that make her an ideal role model of femininity and authority, even if the character never steps outside her culturally assigned role.

<22> The second narrative of interest to this essay is a little tract that Sherwood wrote in 1821. It is only a few pages long and is – surprisingly for such a pragmatic writer – a fairy tale or at least, it's a fairy tale on one level, but the subtext is composed along the strongly religious lines one expects of Sherwood. *The Rose* was published three years after *The Fairchild Family* and religious didacticism is still very much the key element of her writing. This particular fairy tale has been included here not because it is a fairy tale in the traditional sense, where good is pitched against evil and the beautiful (virtuous) maiden marries the charming prince, but because it charts the degrees of excellence possible within feminine beings: that is, it presents the social, intellectual and spiritual markers of excellence and then describes what are the most empowering of these. The fact that Sherwood has ventured into the realm of the fairy at all, however, suggests that she was attempting to do something a little different with this narrative, evidenced in the way she critiques some of the cultural values that are placed on femininity. Added to which, Sherwood's narrative is also told from a uniquely feminine perspective since no male characters appear in the story. F.J. Harvey Darton states unequivocally that "Mrs. Sherwood abhorred fairy-tales, as her treatment of Sarah Fielding's *Governess* shows" and certainly, after she re-wrote *The Governess* in 1820, removing all the fairy tale elements of which she disapproved, Sherwood and the fairy story do seem to be an unlikely alliance.⁽¹⁰⁾ In *The Rose*, however, she initiates a Romantic dialogue between theology and spirituality, between didacticism and fantasy, which reflects not only her desire to produce an educational book but also her underlying skill as a story-teller.

<23> Sherwood's tale takes place in a moonlit clearing in a wild wood in which appears a host of fairies/angels gathered round their exquisite queen. The female fairies who feature in this little tale, with their "silken wings", their "white velvet robes" adorned with "precious stones" and their gossamer bridal veils illuminated by an unearthly light, are clearly intended to be read as both highly spiritual as well as ultra-feminine beings (11). White, of course, is traditionally the

symbolic color of purity and virtue and angels are messengers of divine inspiration, thus they are imbued with mystical significance. So too is the Rose of the title. In more orthodox fairy tales, the white rose represents purity and the red rose symbolizes love, but here Sherwood appears to have conflated these two meanings. Her mystical rose is the representative totem of idealized femininity since it is given in recognition of spiritual worth (or purity) and true (selfless) love - the spiritual guise of “immortal beauty and never-fading honour” (24). With her overt use of religious symbolism Sherwood elevates this fairy tale from simple morality tale to religious homily, thus imbuing it with greater authority by making it educational and therefore at once more respectable.(11)

<24> The narrator of this story is a young female, hiding behind some trees one May night. As the moon shines on a clearing in front of her she becomes privy to a portal opening between two worlds which allows her to witness the power of an exalted state of consciousness in which identification with spiritual purity, virtue and love is shown to be more desirable than all the physical (or earthly) attributes of femininity put together. Vying to be awarded the Rose trophy each of Sherwood’s fairies demonstrate conventional feminine traits but the fairy queen, by not bestowing the Rose on any of them, implies that something far more valuable is wanting. Sherwood then presents her intellectual fairies for judgment. One fairy, who is “skilled in ancient lore” (20) and another who has “an imagination wild and fertile as that of the great magician Merlin” are different from the others in that it is their minds that are being judged (21). They are depicted as intellectuals — as fairy bluestockings, in effect — Yet Sherwood, no doubt well aware that intellectual women were viewed as unfeminine by society (because their intellectuality precluded them from embracing marriage and motherhood as the be-all and end-all of life) shows that the Rose will never be awarded to any female who flaunts her intellectual excellence. In this Sherwood would appear to be anticipating the cultural hiatus that would, certainly by 1830, identify “intellectuality and womanliness” quite firmly as “opposites.”(12)

<25> Another fairy is there with her young daughter and, being modest as well as a mother, hangs back from the rest. Echoing Wollstonecraft’s ideal mother-figure in the *Original Stories*, Miranda is shown as living her life “doing good” to others and gaining the utmost pleasure from it and she passes on what she terms this “gift of fairyism” to her daughter, thus ensuring its continuance in another generation of fairies/women (22).(13) This gift of fairyism, however, can be read as a euphemism for ideal femininity as Miranda teaches all her daughters “to love home, and to render themselves useful in retirement, rather than to seek admiration abroad”, telling them that they should spend their time usefully, industriously “doing good to others” rather than indolently “pleasing themselves” (25). The only talents worthy of notice in a female, Sherwood appears to be saying here, are modesty, retirement and self-sacrifice and that, ironically, the only way to be noticed is through self-effacement.

<26> This idea of personal sacrifice as a condition for promoting the happiness and well-being of others, whilst obviously Christ-like in its implication, somewhat reinforces a sense of self-negation, especially for women. Yet, by making her fairy woman a mythical being, Sherwood is suggesting that the idea that such a perfect female as the completely self-less but still fulfilled ‘angel’ actually exists, is also a myth. This young fairy and her saintly mother inhabit an imaginary world and this enables their exemplary virtue and piety to stand as an idealistic aim

for the reader rather than as a realistic goal. Sherwood makes a clear distinction here between two kinds of femininity - between a person actively “doing good to others” and one who is simply “pleasing themselves”. She does not advocate retirement from the public sphere but rather an engagement with what is important within it. She promotes the notion that being “useful” is far more valuable to a sense of well-being than “seeking admiration”, and that loving “home” instead of wandering “abroad” looking for that admiration is not an admission of failure. Whilst Sherwood lauds the mother’s selfless devotion to the well-being of others which was, increasingly, the philanthropic ethos that gave so many middle class women their identity and sense of purpose, she also endorses a strong, feminine, sense of self that identifies closely with the moral qualities ascribed to Christ. So, although apparently supporting traditional patriarchal notions of femininity in this narrative, she also communicates an empowering spiritual subtext to those who, much like the narrator as she secretly observes the fairy gathering, are striving to see those superior qualities that lie beyond the physical. Sherwood’s fairies are the spiritual manifestation of a truly virtuous femininity and they represent inner excellence, a condition that Sara Coleridge felt was still worth commenting on when, in 1826 and channelling Wollstonecraft’s Mrs. Mason, she wrote: “by fastening our attention too exclusively on what is external we overlook in the woman what we are in no danger of doing with regard to the flower and the landscape – the beauty of the soul” (Mudge 200). By subverting the traditional fairytale depiction of the wild wood as a dark and menacing place peopled by wild animals and witches, therefore, Sherwood instead creates a place of Romantic, spiritual revelation in which the sacred feminine, in the shape of the exalted queen and her angelic fairy disciples, authorizes a spiritual sisterhood which ennoble the idea of feminine endeavour instead of demonizing it. Breaking with tradition, Sherwood presents no evil fairies or wicked witches hidden in the depths of her wild wood, just varying degrees of feminine excellence and spiritual enlightenment.

<27> The issue of what constitutes feminine virtue is very much at the forefront of this little story, but since Sherwood has placed her characters firmly in fairyland, using the device of pointedly taking the reader away from the ‘real’ world and leading her/him into an enchanted space this suggests that she is trying to present a different image from that found in her more conventional religious tracts. As Mathew Grenby suggests, *The Rose* is Sherwood’s “excuse for an investigation of what constitutes virtue” and certainly this is true but she also uses this investigation of virtue to suggest a more nuanced vision of femininity (“Tame Fairies” 12). The fairy mother and daughter represent virtue in its most idealized form, of course, but their feminine identity is defined by a sense of the moral, virtuous and Christian state of their spirituality. As Grenby also writes, for “the more Evangelical writers” such as Sherwood, self sacrifice was not only part of the make-up of the feminine woman, it was also “the key to spiritual salvation” (“Real Charity,” 192). The fairies in Sherwood’s narrative, therefore, serve to communicate the notion that spiritual empowerment - through an endorsement of Christ-like virtues - can help to negate the stereotypical assumptions that normally blight feminine identity. However Philippa Levine, although commenting mainly on the lives of Victorian women, argues that religion offered them “at best a confused and mixed message” and that it was still a “critical source of sex role segregation”, despite its “sometimes liberating face” (34). Agress, too, suggests that both More and Sherwood promote the idea of women as “subordinate creatures” and that, in spite of their attempts “to be messiahs to women”, they inadvertently became “the devil’s disciples”, by appearing to condone, rather than to challenge, patriarchal power (174). Whilst many didactic narratives do appear only to support and condone patriarchal domination of

femininity, it is interesting to see how in fact they manage to undermine that domination by subtly shifting the balance of power away from men and towards women. Their female characters have the courage of their (religious) convictions and, without exception, they eschew the pleasures of the flesh (flattery, adornments, frivolity and so on) for more esoteric delights and this 'thinking woman's' approach to empowerment is carefully presented in literature that is specifically aimed at young girls.

<28> Although a respected writer of religious and educational tracts for young people, whose works spanned most of the nineteenth-century, the contribution which Sherwood makes to the formation of an empowered femininity has been largely overshadowed by her reputation as a writer of religious homilies. The overt and relentless didacticism which dominates many of her narratives like *Little Henry and His Bearer* (1814), *The Infant's Progress* (1821), and *A Mother's Duty* (1832), for example, tends to hide the glimpses she gives of the more spiritual aspects of femininity whereby traits such as compassion, passivity, and humility are emphasized as part of a purer, Christ-like state of being and in both *The Fairchild Family* and *The Rose* Sherwood promotes a strongly religious view of the truly feminine woman as the natural disciple of Christ. Perhaps unwittingly, she holds similar view to Wollstonecraft who announced that "becoming dependent only on Him for the support of my virtue, I view, with indignation, the mistaken notions that enslave my sex" (*Vindication* 122). As Neil Cocks has argued, by utilizing the Evangelical belief in Divine Truth within her narratives (autobiographical as well as fictional) Sherwood's "scriptural interpretation [...] enables the articulation of a subversive self-valorisation", not only for herself as an author of course, but also for the women/girls who read what she writes (para.6). In creating a positive image that women can identify with then, Christian and moral values become powerful antidotes to culturally-inspired temptations such as the love of self, love of fine living, love of praise and flattery and so on, all of which were seen as weak and essentially damaging feminine traits. Whilst no-one can accuse her of being a closet feminist, Sherwood nevertheless manages to undermine and re-work many of the negative associations of femininity and thanks to her, and others like her (the "cursed Barbauld crew" so despised by Charles Lamb), the matriarchal image of the pious and virtuous woman, as epitomized by Mrs. Fairchild, became an enduring symbol of empowered femininity that lasted throughout the Victorian age (17). Mrs. Fairchild may be an overly pious character and, as a result of her unwavering commitment to fighting the sins of the flesh, it is easy to see her as an austere intellectual - an unfeminine woman, in effect. Yet, if we can look beyond her staunch belief in Original Sin and her unquenchable religious fervour, there emerges instead the picture of a strong-minded, committed woman of unquestionable spiritual virtue who, like Sherwood's fairy queen, is the epitome of empowered femininity.

<29> During the period when Sherwood was writing, it is probably fair to say that the depiction of femininity in didactic texts had been overshadowed by the genre's often overwhelming dedication to moral and religious education. Yet, despite the comprehensive research that has been carried out into the moral content of didactic literature, of recording the prevailing attitudes towards children and women, of evaluating the effects of patriarchal dominance in the home, the complex relationship of women to femininity remains undervalued. Whilst influential writers like Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Alexander (among others) were eager to denigrate and ridicule women in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, things had not noticeably improved by the middle of the nineteenth. Depictions of ideal femininity were still the result of patriarchal

determinism and such representations were too often used in male-authored literature as a tool to promote women's containment in the home, or 'private sphere'. Women were, as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar have argued, "figuratively confined" to one place, since they were both "enclosed in parlours and encased in texts, imprisoned in kitchens and enshrined in stanzas" (84). Gillian Beer has also noted that such representations recognize "the fictive in our understanding" and that their "encoding of assumptions and desires reinforces as natural and permanent what may be temporary and learnt", warning that such "[r]epresentations rapidly become representatives" (77). The construction of nineteenth-century femininity, as the feminist critics of the 1960s and 1970s discovered, was mostly predicated on patriarchal containment and confinement, both of physical freedom and of feminine potential but, as Nina Auerbach and U.C. Knoepfelmacher note, several notable women writers of Victorian children's literature produced "parables as concerned with female empowerment as *Jane Eyre*" (Auerbach and Knoepfelmacher 13). This was not purely a Victorian phenomenon, however, as Sherwood, Edgeworth and Barbauld all demonstrate to varying degrees and, although the majority of these writers are perhaps better known for their 'adult' literature, in choosing also to write for the age-group Sarah Trimmer (1741-1810) had defined as being 'children' and 'young persons', they were far less susceptible to public ridicule or to the accusations of anti-feminists who were always ready to vilify the learned woman as unfeminine. (Trimmer had decreed "all young gentleman and ladies to be Children, till they are fourteen, and young persons till they are at least twenty-one") (Barry 22).

<30> Sherwood's writing spans the Regency, Georgian and Victorian eras and she was clearly a woman of her time for, after the upheavals of the French Revolution and the terrors of the Napoleonic Wars, England was in flux and her religious stories and moral tracts, with their confident promise of abundant spiritual reward for a life lived in the fear of God, tapped into the zeitgeist of the age whereby religion and domestic harmony was seen as a unifying force for good. Sherwood became a respected and popular author whose works were still being read into the early part of the twentieth century and she, along with other writers of a similar ilk (non-feminists), engineered a subtle shift in the perception of femininity from 'bad' to 'good', from physical to spiritual, which successfully acted like a thorn in the side of patriarchal assumptions. Re-reading old texts such as these and finding new meanings within them is, according to Adrienne Rich, "more than a chapter in [women's] cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves" (35). The French feminist critic Hélène Cixous also argues that (even now) women still "have everything to write about femininity" and that, in order to offset the effects of gender stereotype and to enable women to know themselves, they must, of necessity, write their own versions of femininity (99). In re-reading these old didactic texts looking for new meanings then, it appears that this is what Sherwood and her contemporaries were attempting to do at a time when feminism was still very much in its infancy. According to Sherwood it would seem that being so religious could be immensely useful to a woman – physically as well as spiritually - and that it was far from tiresome. So, whilst she may not have violently rocked the boat of patriarchal preferences with her literary depictions of feminine identity strengthened and empowered by religious teaching, she has - at the very least – made good headway by paddling purposefully against the cross-current of public opinion.

Endnotes

- (1) Mary Martha Sherwood, *The History of the Fairchild Family; or, The Child's Manual* London: Garland Publishing, 1977, 97. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.(^)
- (2) Despite many criticisms of her hectoring style and Lady Strachey's re-writing of *The Fairchild Family* in 1913, which removed some of the more uncompromising Calvinistic hellfire preaching and scenes of death, Sherwood's narratives remained popular throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. As late as 1908 someone had written inside an 1845 edition of *The Fairchild Family* "I re-read this every Autumn [...] and this year [1908] love it more than ever". The copy is dated Christmas 1896 so presumably it was still a welcome gift nearly a hundred years after it was first published.(^)
- (3) *Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb, 1801-1809*, ed. by Edwin W. Marris Jr., 3 vols (London: Cornell University Press, 1976), 2, 31-32. Lamb wrote that these writers took away that "beautiful Interest in wild tales which made the child a man" and calling them the "Blights and Blasts of all that is Human in man & child" he disparaged them as "the cursed Barbauld Crew".(^)
- (4) This is a reference to the poem "The Angel in the House" (1854-62), Coventry Patmore's panegyric hymn to the domestic virtues of his wife which soon became synonymous with the Victorian idealization of femininity.(^)
- (5) Wollstonecraft, *Original Stories from real life; with conversations, calculated to regulate the affections, and form the mind to truth and goodness.* A new edition (London: n.pub, 1796). Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale Group. <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/ECCO> [first accessed 2007](^)
- (6) Fairy stories and folk tales were thought to be far too close to idle entertainment for members of religious groups like the Unitarians and Dissenters, from whose ranks so many didactic writers came.(^)
- (7) *The Fairchild Family* was written in three parts in 1818, 1842 and 1847, but it is the first book that is most remembered for its overbearing religious content and its rather uncompromising stories about death.(^)
- (8) *The Life of Mrs. Sherwood (Chiefly Autobiographical) with extracts from Mr. Sherwood's journal during his imprisonment in France and residence in India*, edited by Her Daughter Sophia Kelly (London: Darton, 1854), 338. Clearly under his spell Sherwood has written about Martyn in her Indian journal that his "features were not regular, but the expression so luminous, so intellectual, so affectionate, so beaming with divine charity [that] the out-beaming of his soul would absorb the attention of every observer". <http://books.google.com>. [first accessed November 2011].(^)

(9)The garden motif appears in several of Sherwood's narratives and short stories including *The Lady of the Manor* (1825-29), *Home* (1837), and *The Happy Family* (1838).(^)

(10)F.J. Harvey Darton, *Children's Books in England: Five Centuries of Social Life*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), 180. Sherwood re-wrote Fielding's *The Governess* in 1827, deliberately leaving out all the original references to fairies.(^)

(11)Fairy stories in general were thought to encourage unrealistic expectations of social advancement in uneducated women with their depictions of pretty milkmaids or poor girls marrying handsome and rich princes, and were therefore not to be encouraged. Not only that, but they were far too close to idle entertainment for members of religious groups like the Unitarians and Dissenters, from whose ranks so many didactic writers came.(^)

(12)Norma Clarke as quoted by Valerie Sanders in *Eve's Renegades: Victorian Anti-Feminist Women Novelists* (London: MacMillan Press Ltd., 1996), 28. (^)

(13)Mrs. Mason announces to her two girls: "We must do good [...] This is what is called virtue"
(12). Wollstonecraft, *Original Stories*, Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale Group.(^)

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