

John Bunyan's Book for Boys and Girls (1686)

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[0 : 00] So, as a historian, I'm in the middle of a long-term research project concerned with religion in the lives of 18th century children, and my talk today emerges from that interest.

I'm slipping a little further back in history today, into the 17th century, as you can see, and this is for two reasons. First, as Library Director at Regent, I have access to a wonderful collection of antiquarian Puritan books, many of which were donated by Dr. Packer, who's often here, and that collection has a particularly fine selection of books by John Bunyan. And second, 18th century children read 17th century books, so this is part of my reason for going back in time a little bit from my usual period. In the autumn, some of you might remember that I gave a talk at Learner's Exchange entitled, John Bunyan and Early Children's Literature. And in my enthusiasm to trace the emergence of children's literature and to explain how Bunyan was remarkable for anticipating later developments, I didn't give myself enough time to actually examine his particular contribution to early children's literature, that is, his book for boys and girls, or *Country Rhymes for Children*.

And this was published in 1686, as you can see. So this is what I promised to do today, fill in some of what I had to skip over last time. But first, very quickly, again, a brief biographical introduction to John Bunyan. This is the man himself. Bunyan was a Puritan minister and author of religious books, including his enormously popular *Pilgrim's Progress*. And this is a photo, actually, from our rare books collection at Regent. It's a very early printing of the *Pilgrim's Progress*.

After the Bible and the plays of Shakespeare, Bunyan's writings have been foremost among the books of the English-speaking world. *Pilgrim's Progress* is regarded as one of the most significant works of religious English literature. It has been translated into more than 200 languages, and it has never been out of print.

And also, Dr. Packer thinks that all of you should read it. He would say so, I'm sure, if he was here. Yeah. He reads it once a year, or maybe he has it read to him now, once a year. That's true. Yep.

[2 : 54] Bunyan's life spanned the major religious and political events of 17th century Britain, including long periods of intolerance for ministers who did not conform to the established or Anglican church. And as a result of not conforming, Bunyan spent more than 13 years in prison.

In addition to *Pilgrim's Progress*, Bunyan published 42 other books, including *A Book for Boys and Girls*. So, *A Book for Boys and Girls*, or *Country Rhymes for Children*, was the only book Bunyan wrote that was meant especially for young readers. It may be difficult to see at this distance of years how revolutionary this book was, engaging with its young readers through delight and enticement in an approach that would only truly gain ground in the centuries following Bunyan.

Very few in the 17th century recognized children as a special audience in its requirements and capabilities, and thus deserving of a literature of their own.

A Book for Boys and Girls is a collection of 72, or sorry, 74 poems, ranging from 4 to 192 lines long, and each working to illustrate some aspect of God's ways to children, but using only those occupations, objects, creatures, and experiences that children in rural England would know.

So it was homely and down to earth. And these poems develop a strategy of pleasing in order to instruct that makes them almost unique among early examples of children's literature.

[4 : 47] By contrast, another children's book of the period, and one that I've spent quite a bit of time with in my research and writing, is James Janeway's *A Token for Children*, which was published in 1671.

Janeway's very popular little book, this was an incredibly popular book, published over and over and over again. It tells the stories of 13 godly children as they cheerfully succumb to death.

Some of the scenes in this book are surprising. Well, many of them are surprising, but like a deathly ill child who would jump up in his bed, snapping his fingers, is one that particularly sticks with me.

And then he, you know, sweetly fell asleep in Jesus, which is sort of the echo throughout the book. Isaac Watts' collection of poems, *Divine Songs, Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children*, which was published in 1715, deals in danger, caution, and the threat of hellfire.

The child who does not heed his teacher's or his parent's word, for example, can expect that, quote, Raven shall pick out his eyes and eagles eat the same. Against the backdrop of cautionary tales and earnest accounts of blessed early deaths, Bunyan's book for boys and girls is refreshingly cheerful in its tone and attractive in its examples.

[6 : 21] Indeed, its prefatory poem, *To the Reader*, announces the purpose of the collection in contrast to such ministers, those that would frighten.

So here he says, does anybody have experience reading 17th century script? Yeah, okay.

So some things to look out for are this elongated S is not an F, so this is ministers.

It's usually, it can catch on real quickly, but that can make you stumble at first. So, our ministers, long time by word and pen, dealt with them, counting them, not boys, but men, thunderbolts, they shot at them and their toys, but bitch them, nor, sorry?

Hit. Hit. Hit. Hit. Hit. Hit. Hit. Oh. Hit's probably better than bit. Yeah. You gotta watch this, but I'd like to be in time. But hit them more, because they were girls and boys.

[7 : 32] That's the ages. Oh. Yeah. And that thing about before the they, that there's a funny... Here? Uh, there's the, the, the, the, the, the, the, the, the word before they, the, the, before the e.

Is that another s? Cause. Cause, yeah. So, because. Yeah. The s's and the h's are funny, that's it. Yeah. And this is a little bit, um, this is not the clearest text.

Wow. This is clearer. Um, so this is what Bunyan says that he's gonna do. While by their playthings, I would them entice to mount their thoughts from what are childish toys to heaven, for that's prepared for girls and boys.

Nor do I confine myself to these, as to shun graver things that I seek to please, those more composed with better things than toys, though thus I would be catching girls and boys.

So this is the difference. This is what he's trying to do in the book here. Um, his method is to use those things that children know and are naturally pleased with to draw them on to thoughts of God and heaven.

[8 : 45] Bunyan started where children were with what he saw they already valued. He explored only those things that would be familiar to children in any farm town in rural England.

Eggs, swallows, cuckoos, larks, and moles, flies, candles, snails, sun, and fish, bell ringing, looking glasses, and papers, music, plums, butterflies, and flint.

These are all subjects that he takes up in his poems. These things then became patterns of higher things in his poems. More than elevating the everyday, Bunyan offered another way to read God's will.

Puritans were invited to read the Bible as the first book, but also to see the world itself or nature as another book, where God lays out all one needs to know. Could one but read and meditate upon it? His poems offer children a way to read the book of the world, to go to school with spiders, and to learn from ants, birds, fish, and insects, just as the verses may help children read them enough to tackle the Bible on their own, so they offer a way to read the world.

[9 : 56] In Bunyan's little book, we see a demonstration of how a child might read God's book of the world. Roughly half of the poems deal with human subjects of activity, and the other half with the natural world.

Only a few poems fit in either category. Through it all, Wensel senses a tender and genuine love for children. So first, a book for boys and girls and human activities.

In *Of the Boy and Butterfly*, seen here, the opening describes a boy vainly chasing the butterfly that will escape him, that will always escape him.

Behold how eager this, our little boy, is of this butterfly, as if all joy, all profits, honors, yea, and lasting pleasures were wrapped up in her, or the richest treasures found in her would be bundled all together when all her all is lighter than a feather.

In a collection in which the verse tends to be workmanlike rather than graceful, these ones are among the most conspicuously rhetorical, with alliteration and repetition, all, all, all her all, as if the language itself would take flight, although these means are used to conjure an image of false importance.

[11 : 19] So the second stanza, he hallows, runs, and cries out, here boys, here, nor duff he brambles, or the nettles fear, he stumbles at the mole holes, up he gets, and runs again, as one bereft of wits, and all this labor and this large outcry is only for a silly butterfly.

And the boy in this stanza hallows, runs, and cries out, here boys, here, all oblivious to falls, brambles, and nettles. The poem, however, deals gently with the foolish boy.

Bunyan often explained his poems in what he called comparisons, as here. So this is the, the next page to the poem, a comparison.

This little boy, an emblem, is of those whose hearts are holy at the world's dispose. The butterfly doth represent to me the world's best things as best but fading be.

All are but painted nothings and false toys, like this poor butterfly, to these are boys. His running through nettles, thorns, and briars to gratify his boyish fond desires, his tumbling over mole hills to attend, his end, namely, his butterfly to gain.

[12 : 38] Does plainly show, show, uh, what hazard some men run to get what will be lost as soon as one. Men seem in choice, then children far more wise, because they run not after butterflies.

When yet, alas, for what are empty toys? They follow children like to beardless boys. Um, harsh censure is saved for the grown men who ought to know better and yet still chase metaphorical butterflies.

In another poem of the child with the bird at the bush, which is set to music, actually, you can see here, um, a child actor again figures in a chase of sorts, but this time the child's intention is to save the flying creature from harm.

Here the child speaker is a type of Christ, eager to coax the bird to safety and away from thorns, storms, kites, and snares, and offering instead warmth, good food, silks, occupation, and a palace. I'll teach thee all the notes at court, unthought of music thou shalt play, and all that feathered do resort shall praise thee for it every day. And yet, in the end, the bird flies away, preferring danger, perhaps not understanding the child's call.

[14 : 05] The comparison here, perhaps a little heavy-handedly, identifies the child as Christ and the bird as sinners.

The bird's own songs are foolish toys which to destruction lead the way, and the poem concludes here, the arguments this child doth choose to draw to him a bird thus wild, choose Christ, familiar speech doth use to make to him be reconciled.

The comparison not only suggests the child's and by extension Christ's method, which is to use the familiar to draw the sinner forth, it also mirrors Bunyan's own method throughout the collection.

Familiar language and appeals draw the bird, the sinner, and the child reader. Here the child becomes a figure not just of Christ but also of the poet who coaxes rather than frightens.

Whoever however lovely and encouraging the poem, however, the foolish bird ignores the call and flies away. In the end, the focus is on the sinner's ability to make a choice, even the wrong choice, as much as Christ's attractive call.

[15 : 22] More common than poems that deal with children are those that look at common objects made by people. Among the three candle poems in the collection, the simplest, the fly at the candle imagines a fly in a combat with the candle.

But the more it attempts to extinguish the light, the more it merely burns itself against a light impervious to its attacks. In Upon the Sight of a Pound of Candles Falling to the Ground, that's the name of one poem, a wise person who drops candles in the dark is urged to take another candle from above and light it so that he can see to pick the others up.

The first lit candle in the comparison is Christ. And while this image of Christ is deeply embedded in Christian tradition, the variation of a theological commonplace shows Bunyan at his most interesting in the collection.

The child is invited not just to recognize the comparison but to be delighted in the connection, one that he or she might not have seen before. It is in Meditation on a Candle, Upon the Candle, which is a longer poem.

As you can see, it's actually cut off at several spots. Bunyan demonstrates his facility with invention, the ability to find not just one but many comparisons for a single subject.

[16 : 48] This is a real show-off piece. The poem is 65 lines long and offers 21 different metaphors, most of which involve the candle's flame as grace, the wick as the soul, the wax as flesh, and the surrounding darkness as sin.

Here, most comparisons occupy just a couplet, two lines, with the observation in the first line, in the comparison in the second. So, but candles in the wind are apt to flare and Christians in a tempest to despair.

This is the observation and this, the comparison. The flame also with smoke attended is, and in our holy lives there is much amiss. Sometimes a thief will candlelight annoy and lust do seek our graces to destroy.

One can understand the early historian of children's literature, F.J. Harvey Dutton's suggestion that Bunyan almost tortured his mind to find comparisons.

But there is more in this poem of the virtuoso than the tortured man. How many comparisons can he manage on a candle and still hold the attention of the child?

[18 : 09] The last comparison introduces a difference both in form and in matter. The man now lays him down upon his bed, the wick yields up its fire, and so is dead.

The candle now extinct is, but the man, by grace not such a glory, there to stand. Stand.

I don't even see them. I don't even see them. Yeah. Here Bunyan identifies the limits of the emblem.

A candle is not like a man's life when it is over because a man or a child or a woman can expect a second lighting. Many of the other objects made by people in the collection, the majority of which come in the second half, are presented as either morally neutral or wholly good in upon a sheet of white paper.

For instance, the paper can be subject unto the foulest pen or fairest, and it will show freely to its readers anything written on it, whether that be wisdom or blot.

[19 : 22] The looking glass in upon a looking glass can reflect our faults, but only if we are willing to see them. Watches, penny lobes, spectacles, and medicine are all offered as only potentially good.

What matters is the use to which they are put. So, a book for boys and girls and music for children. Such in the case, such is the case, as I just mentioned, in the companion poems on musical instruments, which demonstrate a delight in music. Indeed, two poems in the collection are prefaced with simple musical notation.

We saw one earlier. Here is the first half of Upon a Skillful Player on an Instrument. He that can play well on an instrument will take the ear and captivate the mind with mirth or sadness, for that it is bent thereto as music in it plays stuff fine.

But if one hears that hath there in no skill, as often music glights of such a chance, of its brave notes, they soon be weary well, and there are some who neither sing nor dance.

[20 : 40] Upon an instrument of music in an unskillful hand suggests a similar idea. there is nothing wrong with the instrument in this analogy, nor is there a fault in good music or in the desire to hear it.

Instead, the instrument has the power to provide good, but in an untrained hand, it cannot produce what is wanted. The comparison in this case is to someone new in the church, the unlearned novices in things divine who abuse the Bible and unsavory are.

In the earlier poem, the comparison makes a good gospel minister the musician, whose skillful music may nonetheless fall on ears unable to perceive the music.

In both, music is to be desired. It is like good gospel preaching. It is like a skillful reading of scripture. Nowhere in the collection is Bunyan's pleasure in music more intriguingly teased out than in Upon a Ring of Bells.

In Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners, his spiritual autobiography, which was published twenty years before this book, he had recounted the anxiety he had felt at pursuing his delight in church bell ringing.

[21 : 57] So this is what he wrote. Now you must know that before this I had taken much delight in ringing, but my conscience beginning to be tender, I thought that such a practice was but vain, and therefore forced myself to leave it, yet my mind hankered.

Wherefore I should go to the steeple house and look on, though I durst not ring. But I thought this did not become religion neither, yet I forced myself and would look on still, but quickly after I began to think, sorry, that's think, not thing, how if one of the bells should fall.

By the end of the account, the young bunion is forced to flee lest the whole steeple fall on him. The combination of the intensity of delight with his novice's anxiety about indulging in vanity culminates

in the most memorable image of a sincere lover of religion and bells forced to run from an imaginary calamity.

twenty years later, his long poem *On the Bell Runners* these are some selections from it suggests a milder, more positive view of the value of the bells in their music.

Now, instead of being threatened by the steeple's imagined collapse, the speaker is the steeple. So here, my body is the steeple where they hang, my graces they which do ring every bell.

[23 : 33] Nor is there anything give such a tang when by these ropes these ringers ring them well. The bells are still threatened by naughty boys who would ring badly or for the wrong reasons.

Bunyan still takes pleasure in the music of the bells and ends with a fervent desire should it be appropriate to continue his enjoyment of that music. O Lord, if thy poor child might have his will and might his meanings freely to thee tell, he never of this music has his fill.

There's nothing to him like thy ding-dong bell. The voices of the bells must have room to swing and ring because it is in silence that the tinkling voice of vice is heard.

Silence, not music, is the devil's true medium. Human activity and creations occupy about half the collection as I said but Bunyan shows the strongest appreciation of beauty in his poems of comparison to the natural world and its creatures which is the second kind of poem characterizing the collection.

A book for boys and girls and the natural world. Nature is not always benign of course. Some of the liveliest poems in the collection are those in which a natural creature becomes an exemplum for the child to avoid and Bunyan is at his satirical best in these comparisons.

[25 : 11] Large-mouthed frogs are hypocrites. Overfed swine will have their arrogance corrected by the knife. Playful larks are tempted by the fowler Satan.

Moles prefer the darkness to the light and bees most surprisingly are like sins which must be killed before we can safely get the honey. Every creature from the lowly blowfly to the horse is invoked to demonstrate some danger to the budding Christian child.

The behavior of some dumb creatures can be emulated as well as avoided and in this Bunyan has good medical precedent to follow.

From lions to locusts *Proverbs* offers instruction by encouraging examination of the animal world.

While neither lions nor locusts were indigenous English species Bunyan does take two of his subjects from *Proverbs* the ant and the spider as well as the general instruction to look to natural creatures for example the ant in *Proverbs* 6 verse 6 6 verse 6 is the school master the creature best able to instruct the sluggard on good work habits.

Go to the ant thou sluggard this is from *Proverbs* consider her ways and be wise which having no guide overseer or ruler provide us her food in the summer and gather her food in the harvest.

[26 : 39] now compare this to Bunyan's poem upon the pismire which is an ant if you didn't know that must must we must we enter the pismire go to school to learn of her in summer to provide for winter next ensuing man's a fool or silly ants would not be made his guide but sluggard is it not a shame for thee to be outdone by pismires pretty here their works too will thy condemnation be when at the judgment seat thou shalt appear but since that god doth bid thee to her go obey her ways consider and be wise the pismires tell thee will what thou must do and set the way to life before thine eyes here the ant is not merely a good example for its industriousness it is a reproach to humans who must be taught by such a lowly creature the poem is an adaptation but also a commentary on *proverbs* one that emphasizes how base humans must be to need such instruction part emblem part reminder of the scriptural basis for

Bunyan's method the poem counteracts any reluctance on the part of its readers to learn from lowly creatures the same encouragement to shame or humility is given in the extraordinary dialogue between the sinner and the spider which takes its starting point from *proverbs* 30 verse 28 but develops the comparison with the virtuosity of the candle poems here the sinner has trouble accepting advice from the spider which he variously variously calls venom sorry venom the dregs scum and dross and threatens to crush beneath her feet his feet in *proverbs* the comment the spider is brief given alongside three others that are little on the earth but are yet exceeding wise the ants are people not strong yet they prepare their meat in the summer the colonies are but a feeble fog yet make they their houses in the rocks the locusts have no king yet go they forth all of them by bands the spider taketh hold with her hands and is in kings palaces bunion poems deals with that last suggestion we find spiders even in the palaces of kings and expands on the idea i am a spider yet i can possess the palace of a king where happiness so much abounds nor when i do go thither

do they ask what or whence i come or whither i make my hasty travels no not they they let me pass and i go on my way i seize the palace do with hands take hold of doors of locks or bolts yea i am bold when when clamber up upon the throne the spider has greater freedom than most of us and therefore greater happiness but the most important thing is the difference between an ugly spider who keeps the rules of his creation and the sinner who is created in god's image but whose sins have made him uglier than the spider a creature of integrity the spider's instruction increases in length and persuasiveness until in the end the sinner is forced to concede thou art my monitor i am a fool they learn may sorry thou art my monitor i am a fool they learn may that to spiders go to school they learn may some of the sentence construction takes a moment in fact the spider might even give us the motto for most of the collection this is not right hang on it's just down here i was made for thy prophet do not fear me but if i god thou wilt not hearken to what can the swallow ant or spider do yet i will speak i can but be rejected sometimes great things by small means are affected if bunyan has a favorite part of the book of nature to read and reread it is the sun's position in the sky six poems deal with different views of the sky at various times one before and two just at sunrise two in the morning one in lowering one affair and a final one at sunset in each we see a careful reading of the sky and a variety of ways to equate the sun s-u-n with the sun s-o-n taken as a sequence the meditations

upon the day show if not a temporal then a spiritual progression from uncertainty through security to a warning about the end of life in the first meditation upon people of day the comparison is with those who are first possessed of grace i oft though it be people of day don't know whether tis night whether tis day or no i fancy that i see a little light that cannot yet distinguish day from night i hope i doubt but steady yet steady yet i be not i am not at a point the sun i see not thus tis with who grace but now possessed they know not yet if they are cursed or blessed the poem identifies a liminal space a threshold over which the new convert must pass but through which she is unsure about her status saved or not that space of insecurity suspected hoping but yet not knowing interested Bunyan very much both as a Christian preacher those moments of drama even after the crisis of conversion the simplicity of the shared experience is especially good here the rising of the sun is recognizable literally every day and shared that same sense of uncertainty about when the day has changed places with night would work as well at the end of day but Bunyan of course wants to illustrate a beginning not an ending and the paralleling of simple phrases I hope I doubt leaves the speaker in a state of balance neither in day nor in night although the second poem upon a lowering morning would seem to be more threatening than the first in fact that same sense of balance of hovering at a threshold operates in this poem as well here the mix of light and dark is caused by clouds that to the traveler may threaten slabby rain or snow and having lived in

England I think I know what slabby rain might be yeah when in the poem it does rain the speaker changes his attitude toward both rain and the apparently lowering red of the clouds the same mixed sky the comparison tells us can bring both a sense of grace of sin the next two poems upon the sun's reflection upon the clouds in a fair morning and meditations upon day before sun rising emphasize greater security the sun in the clouds recalls the saints in heaven to the speaker in the first while in the second the possessors of grace are as eager to see Christ's face as those who look to see the sunrise the fifth the most confident identifies the point at which there is no question anymore the sun has risen just as the sun has not until the last is there a hint of warning in of the going down of the sun those who have misspent their summer day are left sorry those who have misspent their summer day are left to mourn the loss of the sun when the day is inevitably over the poems about the sun and the day taken together focus on mourning appropriately for poems addressed to those in the first days of life and on the optimistic idea that clouds notwithstanding the sun is there and always rises though they may read neatly as a sequence no two of these poems are printed together and so even the most apparently complementary poems are separated rather than grouped another early scholar of children's literature

[36 : 10] Warren Wooden argued for a complicated system in the arrangement of verses concluding that the pattern in the original collection was meant to bring children gradually to an understanding of how to read a system largely obscured when later editions omitted dozens of the original poems such a system for increasing a child's spiritual literacy may underlie the collection but subjects and comparisons seem more interspersed chosen for the sake of a pleasing variety for a childhood childhood reader who is easily bored thanks clay organsana