

“The Naughty Girl Reformed”
Femininity in Eighteenth-Century Children’s Literature

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Studying the competing portrayals of young ladies in children's books reveals, in part, the cultural contours of the eighteenth-century English Atlantic. In her 2004 article, "Stripping for the Wolf," Elizabeth Marshall called for the exploration and analysis of competing representations of femininity in children's literature.¹ Diverse representations of girlhood and womanhood emerge in the interactions between female characters and in individual character's internal reflections themselves. Reinforcing the notion that literary characters reflect the cultural changes and conflicts of their period,² Marshall's analytical model also moves literary analysis beyond simple content based methodologies. Though content analysis depends upon generalizations and reliable characterizations in a binary framework of male vs. female, Marshall's poststructuralist feminist analysis recognizes that female characterizations in children's texts "capture not so much the lived experience of girlhood as cultural struggles around gender, sexuality, and power."³ This paper will highlight the appearance of those struggles in a brief number of eighteenth-century children's texts.

The children's literature under study flourished in the English Atlantic from roughly 1740 to 1800. Originally published by John Newbery in London, the specific works cited in this paper come from the Worcester, Massachusetts press of Isaiah Thomas. Designed for children roughly between the ages of four to ten, these works blend amusement, education, and moral instruction. It is through moral instruction predominately that these competing representations of femininity present themselves.

¹ Elizabeth Marshall, "Stripping for the Wolf: Rethinking Representations of Gender in Children's Literature," *Reading Research Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (2004): 256, 259.

² *Ibid.*, 259.

³ *Ibid.*, 259-260.

Analytical readings of eighteenth-century children's literature are often-overlooked, thus this interpretation offers a new perspective on the children's books of the period. While even Marshall claimed this analysis could not apply to this literary set,⁴ I contend that her analytical method can be applied to eighteenth-century works. Marshall based her opinion on the earliest "modern" children's book, which Newbery published in 1744. As the market grew, publishers recognized that their audiences were diverse and growing; authors wrote books with agendas and goals directed toward specific groups. The divergence this created allows for the application of Marshall's theory and an examination of the cultural construction inherent in each sub-genre.

An examination of four children's books--*The Beauty and the Monster* (1785), *The Sugar Plumb* (1787), *The History of Little Goody Twoshoes* (1787), and *The Brother's Gift* (1786) --demonstrates the utility of the model I am advocating. Each of these works feature lead female characters and engage in questions of proper female conduct, especially moral behavior, and attempt, in the words of Marshall, to "school children's pregendered bodies into girlhood."⁵ By analyzing these texts, we can gain a greater understanding of what it meant to be a young lady in the eighteenth century and how parents attempted to instill acceptable social behavior into their daughters, even as these same works presented young girls with several models.

Structured as a play, the English translation of the French fairytale, *The Beauty and the Monster*, features two lead female characters, Sabina and Phedima, both guests of the hideous monster, Phanor. While close friends and confidants, Sabina and Phedima could not be more different, where Sabina is timid, Phedima is confident, assertive, and strong-willed. Thus, from the start, these two female characters are set up in tension with one another, with their

⁴ Ibid., 261.

⁵ Ibid., 269.

interactions allowing for a discourse concerning proper female behavior. At one point, for instance, Phedima playfully teases Sabina for being “in the pouts,” and still later in the fairytale, Sabina scolds Phedima for turning everything into “a subject of raillery.”⁶ By each taking a turn at correcting one another the two characters expose young female readers to female traits and habits to avoid, though it is nearly impossible to know if such lessons were actually heeded.

The Beauty and the Monster is unique in that it validates both forms of femininity – strong and timid – even as they are in opposition to one another. In the end however, Sabina finds true love with the monster Phanor, while Phedima is relegated to a supporting role. The eventual elevation of timid Sabina over assertive Phedima warns young girls to control their developing sexuality to make themselves appealing to proper gentlemen.

The Sugar Plumb, by contrast, suggests the importance of mastering ones behavior and sexuality by using the characters Coquetilla, Prudiana, Profusiana, and Prudentia as vehicles for moral instruction. Unlike *The Beauty and the Monster*, in this work, the four young women do not engage directly with one another, but serve as examples of the different sorts of women found in society. This text also incorporates the mother figure as an essential part of proper feminine formation, the lack of which leads to ruin and despair. Thus, the work serves to both educate young ladies about proper moral and social behavior and remind mothers of their duties to their daughters.

For these four young women, names reveal much about character. Consequently, Coquetilla was a perfect coquette, who “admired nobody but herself,” and “like some silly fly... singed the wings of her reputation.”⁷ Lacking proper dignity, she became “cheap prey” to a

⁶ Stéphanie Félicité Ducrest de Saint Aubin comtesse de Genlis, *The Beauty and the Monster* (Worcester, Massachusetts: Isaiah Thomas, 1785), 20, 25.

⁷ *The Sugar Plumb; or Sweet Amusement for Leisure Hours* (Worcester, Massachusetts: Isaiah Thomas, 1787), 65.

designing man who spoiled her “precarious virtue.”⁸ Prudiana represented the extreme opposite of Coquetilla, as she “kept out of the sight and conversation of the gentlemen, and avoided the company of those ladies, who more freely conversed with the other sex.”⁹ This did not serve her well, as she found herself rejected by proper society after an ignoble affair with her father’s servant, whom she fell prey to due to her lack of acquaintance with proper gentlemen. Profusiana too found herself ruined by her improper feminine ways. She lived profusely, and although intelligent, lacked proper reason, and thus surrounded herself with men who plotted “against her honour,” until she found herself abandoned.¹⁰ The miserable fates of Coquetilla, Prudiana, and Profusiana served as a warning to young female readers to avoid extreme behaviors and instead to practice modesty while engaging with gentlemen and ladies of their own social class. Thus, young girls were not to avoid gentlemen, for as well shall see they were believed to hold the key to true female happiness if one managed themselves properly.

In the end, only prudent Prudentia lived a socially acceptable life. Unlike her peers, she learned from others’ mistakes and focused herself upon attaining appropriate “domestick [sic] virtues” as to secure “future happiness” by making herself “the crown of some worthy gentlemen’s earthly happiness.”¹¹ Thus through the lives of Coquetilla, Prudiana, Profusiana, and Prudentia, young ladies witnessed the pitfalls of extreme behavior and learned that true happiness came from securing a proper marriage, an event which could only occur if one embraced proper feminine ways. Published in 1787, this texts message reinforced developing

8 Ibid., 65-66.

9 Ibid., 67.

10 Ibid., 72.

11 Ibid., 75.

political notions surrounding women's appropriate role in the new Republic; such ideas called upon them to serve their country as good mothers who raised virtuous male citizens and proper young ladies.¹²

The History of Little Goody Twoshoes and *The Brother's Gift* focus on single female characters who inform us on eighteenth-century conceptions of proper female behavior. Margery Meanwell, aka Little Goody Twoshoes, proved one of the most famous female characters in early children's literature. Born into poverty, Margery elevated her social standing through self-education and moral living. Her behavior, as detailed in her fictionalized life story, represented the ideal attributes of an eighteenth century lady. Margery's life highlighted the importance of education and kindness toward the less fortunate, through her promotion of "the welfare and happiness of all her neighbours," by educating their children, even "those whose parents could not afford to pay for their education."¹³

Margery represented a strong female character for young girls to emulate. She always handled herself with proper decorum and used reason over passion to control the whims of her unruly male neighbors. This is especially true when she faced accusations of witchcraft from less educated neighbors who did not understand the new science of the Enlightenment, with which she used to construct a barometer to help local farmers.¹⁴ As a strong successful woman, Margery, like Prudentia, used her social graces to find true happiness in matrimony, thereby reinforcing in young girls the importance of marriage both to their, and society's, eventual happiness and success. A eulogy to Margery at the end of her story sums up perfectly to a young

¹² For more information on this concept, known as Republican Motherhood, see: Linda Kerber, "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment – An American Perspective," *American Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1976): 187-205.

¹³ *The History of Little Goody Twoshoes* (Worcester, Massachusetts: Isaiah Thomas, 1787), 68.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 123-127.

female reader that which they should strive for, as Margery “was a mother to the poor, a physician to the sick, and a friend to all who were in distress.”¹⁵

Similarly, the story of how Billy Bland reformed his sister, naughty girl Kitty, provided a scathing commentary on popular female education, claiming it left young girls vulnerable to becoming “fit objects to be deceived and undone,” as they could only be merely ornamental instead of useful to society.¹⁶ Through a series of tough lessons, Billy teaches Kitty how to be a fit and proper young lady, which offers an interesting commentary on the relationship not only between men and women and who knows best how to prepare young girls for the world, but also between brothers and sisters and their responsibilities to one another.

Kitty’s apt mind paralleled Margery Meanwell’s, yet like Phedima, Kitty was headstrong and forward, in this case negative attributes if not curbed by proper education. She also exhibited many of the same traits as Coquetilla, Prudiana, and Profusiana, such as showing off “the superiority of her breeding” through affected singing, dancing, and writing, as to make people “wearisome to attend her.”¹⁷ For young readers acquainted with the other texts, the message is clear that without redemption, Kitty too faces the same sad fate as those girls who never learned to correct and control themselves.

Billy saves Kitty from that fate by correcting each one of her faults slowly and teaching her to become useful to society, the acclaimed end goal of proper female education and fitting for a society trying to find social order after the Revolution. Thus in a few short pages, this text provides young female readers with an outline of socially acceptable behavior. Kitty learns

¹⁵ Ibid., 142.

¹⁶ *The Brother’s Gift: or, the Naughty Girl Reformed* (Worcester, Massachusetts: Isaiah Thomas, 1786), 6.

¹⁷ Ibid., 8-9.

quickly that proper young ladies attend to their writing, listen to the advice of their elders, work diligently on their needlework, and above all else avoid idleness, the mortal enemy of virtue. In each case, these traits not only serve to elevate young girls to social respectability among their peers, but also help the larger community, especially once they attain the end goal of motherhood.

This short survey of female characters in eighteenth-century children's literature highlights the array of positive and negative feminine traits young female readers witnessed through these works. It is clear from the texts that no single ideal female model existed for young girls to emulate, as each work stressed the value of different traits and left the question of how assertive one should be open to debate. These works also reflect the cultural significance of matrimony to female identity in a time when motherhood was gaining political significance. While it is nearly impossible to know how much young girls actually emulated or followed the moral instruction of these works, they no doubt engaged on some level with these and other female characters who usually lived lives not so different from their own.

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