

【Article】

Female Writers and Their Didactic Novels in the Eighteenth Century: The Early Days of British Children's Literature

Chie Yahashi

Department of Communication, Faculty of Human Studies, Jin-ai University

【Abstract】 This study explored the social and cultural history of British children's literature during the eighteenth century, particularly emphasising female writers and their moral novels. Sarah Fielding's *The Governess* (1749) established the first novel written specifically for girls, and the second half of the eighteenth century witnessed the rise of pedagogical literature for children. This paper divided women writers in those days into two groups: Rational Moralists and Sunday School Moralists, while trying to comment on the development of British children's literature in the eighteenth century, which was overwhelmingly moral and religious. However, certain female writers such as Hannah More strived to succeed in writing something interesting to child readers' eyes, whose didactic stories surely played a significant role in shaping the early days of children's literature in Britain.

Keywords: British children's literature, eighteenth century, female writers, didactic novels

1 Introduction

I have been interested in the language of popular literature in the eighteenth century, especially chapbooks, which were very popular among the public from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries in Britain and America. When working on the linguistic features of English adjectives in chapbooks, I encountered Hannah More's *Cheap Repository Tracts*, which is often considered to have contributed to the development of children's literature at the end of the eighteenth century in Britain.

Through Hannah More's moral stories aimed at young children, my interest in the early days of British children's literature has grown, which served as the initial trigger for this paper. Hopefully, this paper will enable us to probe into the contribution of female writers in the eighteenth century to the rise of children's literature in Britain.

2 The Origins of British Children's Literature

2.1 Early Writing

It may safely be argued that, before the mid-eighteenth century, books for British children were hardly enjoyable, and these were spelling books, schoolbooks, conduct books or deeply religious, which never failed to be instructional. One of the earliest publications that has had 'a significant and lasting effect on the development of children's literature in Britain and North America' is *The Babees Book, or a 'Lytyl Reporte' of How Young People Should Behave*, which was an early courtesy book (Johnson 2009: xvii). Further, James Janeway's *A Token for Children* (1671-2) was a good example of a religious work.

What the children in those days enjoyed reading most was never designated for them. According to Nakano et al. (2006), they had grown to acquire almost the same written language based on traditional folklore¹ or books for adults. For instance, child readers were able to skim John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). Based on this, children's literature writers were able to produce their works in adult language.

2.2 Turning Point

In the first half of the eighteenth century, Isaac Watts succeeded in combining religion and the pleasure of the mind in *Divine Songs Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children* (1715) so that the child readers would not fear hell (Nakano et al. 2006). Also, Thomas Boreman published *Description of Three Hundred Animals* (1730) as well as the *Gigantick Histories* (1740-3), a series of illustrated tales of London landmarks, following Watt's belief that children's literature authors should not get their readers scared.

John Newbery, however, is considered the father of children's literature in Britain, as he was the first author and publisher to specialize in children's literature. It was in 1744 when Newbery 'set up a bookshop and publishing house in London, and it became one of the first to publish children's books' (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*). Newberry's two most influential titles were *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* (1744), the first children's book, and *The History of Little Goody Two-shoes* (1765), a variation on Cinderella.

In 1744, Mary Cooper published the first collections of nursery rhymes in *Tommy Thumb's Song-Book* and *Tommy Thumb's Pretty Song-Book*, including the first printed version of 'Cock Robin'. And then, Sarah Fielding published *The Governess; or The Little Female Academy* (1749). This title is seen as the first book-length original fiction for children, compared to Watt's verses or Newberry's fables and ballads.

3 Female Writers

3.1 History

According to Townsend (1978: 24), by the end of the eighteenth century, ‘the writing of children’s books in England was beginning to rank as an occupation for gentlewomen’. In the meantime, like many other British people, these female writers who were deeply concerned with the French Revolution during the period of 1789-95 promoted the Sunday School movement so that ‘the lower order should be helped and instructed, so long as they were not led to forget their place’ (Townsend 1978: 29):

- (1) The ladies ranged from the mildly pious to the sternly moralistic. There were those such as Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Lady Fenn, Priscilla Wakefield, Dorothy and Mary Jane Kilner, and Mary Eliott, who saw no harm in giving children instruction mixed with a little lukewarm enjoyment, and perhaps earning themselves an honest guinea in the process. There were also the successors in spirit to the fierce old Puritans: notably Mrs Trimmer and Mrs Sherwood. But the best remembered of all the women writers of this period [by the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century], Maria Edgeworth, though no less didactic, sprang from a different and more intellectually motivated group, the English followers of Rousseau. (Townsend 1978: 24)

Townsend (1978) suggests three types of female writers: those who gave children instruction mixed with some enjoyment, those who were the heirs of Puritan literature, and those who were the devoted admirers of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78).

Nonetheless, Demers (2015) classifies these women authors in the late eighteenth century into two groups, ‘rational moralists’ and ‘Sunday School moralists’. Demer’s classification seems to be more convincing when we take the fact that the women writers were, in a greater or lesser degree, subject to the influence of Puritan literature or Education theories by John Locke and Rousseau. Thus, this paper employs Demers (2015)’s subgroups when discussing the moral stories of the lady writers.

Townsend (1978) and Demers (2015) refer to 18 female writers in the late eighteenth century and the beginning of nineteenth century in Britain as follows:

- (2) Sarah Fielding (1710-1768)
 Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi (1741-1821)
 Sarah Trimmer (1741-1810)
 Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743-1825)

Lady Ellenor Fenn (1743-1813)
Hannah More (1745-1833)
Priscilla Wakefield (1751-1832)
Mary Ann Kilner (1753-1831)
Dorothy Kilner (1755-1836)²
Jane Cave (1754?-1812)
Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97)
Anne Hume 'Nancy' Livingston (1763-1841)³
Maria Edgeworth (1767-1849)
Jane Marcet (1769-1858)
Barbara Hofland (1770-1844)
Mrs Sherwood, born Mary Martha Butt (1775-1851)
Mary Elliott (1794-1870)
Catherine Parr Traill (1802-1899)

In the interest of saving time, this paper chooses the following female writers, who appeared in *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*:

- (3) a. Rational Moralists: Sarah Fielding, Mary Wollstonecraft, Maria Edgeworth
- b. Sunday School Moralists: Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Hannah More

3.2 Rational Moralists

The rational moralists wrote 'improving books for children' between 1750 and 1850, and they aimed at 'cultivating rational thought and moral judgments along the principles proposed by Locke and Rousseau' (Demers 2015: 165-166).

3.2.1 Sarah Fielding (1710-1768)

Sarah Fielding was an English author and translator whose novels were among the earliest in the English language and the first to examine the interior lives of women and children.

Fielding was the younger sister of the novelist Henry Fielding, whom many readers believed to be the author of the novels she published anonymously, although he denied these speculations in print. In 1744, she published her first book, *The Adventures of David Simple*, a novel whose comic prose style imitated that of both her brother and his chief literary rival, Samuel Richardson, who was also one of her close friends.

The Governess (1749) is didactic and portrays with comic sensibility the hazards of British social life for the moral development of women. Considered the first for girls in the English language, it was an immediate success and went through five editions in Fielding's lifetime while inspiring numerous imitations. Although didacticism frequently overshadows the narrative drive of Fielding's prose, critics credit her as an innovator with a shrewd sense of human motive and keen ironic humour. (Encyclopaedia Britannica)

3.2.2 Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97)

Mary Wollstonecraft was an English writer and passionate advocate of educational and social equality for women. She outlined her beliefs in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), considered a classic of feminism.

The daughter of a farmer, Wollstonecraft was an educator and worked as a governess. In 1792, Wollstonecraft left England to observe the French Revolution in Paris, where she lived with an American, Captain Gilbert Imlay. Wollstonecraft returned to work again for Joseph Johnson and joined an influential radical group, which gathered at his home and included William Goldwin, Thomas Paine, Thomas Holcroft, William Blake, and, after 1793, William Wordsworth.

In 1797, Mary and Goldwin married. The marriage was happy but brief; Mary died 11 days after the birth of her second daughter, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, who became a novelist best known as the author of *Frankenstein*. (Encyclopaedia Britannica)

3.2.3 Maria Edgeworth (1767-1849)

Maria Edgeworth was an Anglo-Irish author, known for her children's stories and for her novels of Irish life.

Edgeworth lived in England until 1782, when the family went to Edgeworthstown, County Longford, in midwestern Ireland, where Maria, then 15 and the eldest daughter, assisted her father in managing his estate. In this way, Maria acquired the knowledge of the rural economy and of the Irish peasantry that was to be the backbone of her novels.

Encouraged by her father, she began her writing in the common sitting room, where the 21 other children in the family provided material and an audience for her stories. She published them in 1796 as *The Parent's Assistant*. Even the intrusive moralizing, attributed to her father's editing, does not wholly suppress their vitality, and the children who appear in them.

The feminist movement of the 1960s led to the reprinting of her *Moral Tales for Young People*, 5 vol. (1801) and *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795) in the 1970s. Her novels continued to be regularly reprinted in the 20th century. (Encyclopaedia Britannica)

3.2.4 Discussion

The first novel for children, Sarah Fielding's *The Governess* (1749), was utterly didactic. As Demer (2015) argues, 'the tutor, who aims to instill a sense of rational agency and self-command' in the books of Sarah Fielding as well as Mary Wollstonecraft. In Wollstonecraft's *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788), Mrs Mason instructs the girls to pay attention to 'conscious worth', 'simple elegance', and 'a most excellent understanding and feeling heart' (Demers 2015: 166).

Meanwhile, although Maria Edgeworth put instruction at the centre of her writing, she was one of the women writers whose books 'have modest though effective literary qualities..., for the authors were anxious to enliven information and moral principles to hold young reader's attention' (Demers 2015: 167).

All in all, for most of the Rational Moralists, in a similar way to the Puritan writers, instruction was the paramount purpose of their writing. However, some of the women writers such as Edgeworth, conceived of ways to attract child readers to their works.

3.3 Sunday School Moralists

As in Townsend (1987: 29), Hannah More originally intended to establish Sunday Schools, so that 'the populace could learn to read'. Sarah Trimmer was an early supporter of the Sunday School movement.

3.3.1 Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743-1825)

Anna Laetitia Barbauld was a British writer, poet and editor whose best writings are on political and social themes. Her poetry belongs essentially in the tradition of 18th-century meditative verse.

The only daughter of John Aikin, Barbauld lived from the age of 15 to 30 in Warrington, Lancashire, where her father taught at a Nonconformist Protestant academy. There she was encouraged by her father's friends and colleagues to pursue her education and literary talents. In 1744 she married Rochemont Barbauld, a French Protestant clergyman.

Although she is probably best known for her hymn 'Life! I Know Not What Thou Art', her most important poems included 'Corsica' (1768) and 'The Invitation' (1773).

(*Encyclopaedia Britannica*)

3.3.2 Hannah More (1745-1833)

Hannah More is an English religious writer, best known as a writer of popular tracts and as an educator of the poor.

As a young woman with literary aspiration, More made the first of her visits to London in 1773-74. She was welcomed into a circle of Bluestocking wits and was befriended by Sir Joshua Reynolds, Dr Samuel Johnson, Edmund Burke, and, particularly, David Garrick. After Garrick died in 1779, she forsook writing for the stage, and her strong piety and Christian attitudes, already intense, became more marked.

Through her friendship with the abolitionist philanthropist William Wilberforce, she was drawn to the Evangelicals. From her cottage in Somerset, she began to admonish society. In the climate of alarm over the French Revolution, her fresh and forceful defence of traditional values was met with strong approval.

She produced a series of ‘Cheap Repository Tracts’ at the rate of three a month for three years with the help of her sisters and friends, the tracts sold for a penny each, 2,000,000 being circulated in a single year. They advised the poor in ingeniously homely language to cultivate the virtues of sobriety and industry and to trust in God and the kindness of the gentry.

(*Encyclopaedia Britannica*)

3.3.3 Discussion

Anna Laetitia Barbauld published *Hymns in Prose for Children* in 1781, ‘written in the belief that a child should see God’s presence in all things, and was condemned by Charles Lamb, who had discomfort about the solemn women writers in those days (Townsend 1987: 28). In a similar way to Barbauld, supporters of the Sunday School movement were didactic, Hannah More was, of course, one of them. Nevertheless, More was different from her contemporaries, as she sought a way to make her works unique by introducing a chapbook style. Chapbooks are defined as follows:

- (4) [A chapbook is] a modern name applied by book-collectors and others to specimens of the popular literature which was formerly circulated by itinerant dealers or chapmen, consisting chiefly of small pamphlets of popular tales, ballads, tracts, etc. They were issued in great numbers through the 18th cent.

(*Oxford Companion to English Literature* 184)

Chapbooks belong to popular literature, which was ‘what the unsophisticated reader has chosen for pleasure’ (Neuburg 1968: 12). Even though the chapbooks were greatly enjoyed by the poor, they had acutely been criticized by religious organizations due to their contents.

In the first half of the eighteenth century, the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge established the Charity Schools to promote education for the poor, which unfortunately hardly lasted long. After the Charity Schools, there occurred the Sunday School Movement, which also

aimed to increase the rate of literacy among poor children. In Shephard (1973)'s study, both the Charity Schools and the Sunday Schools tried to put moral reading in place of vulgar ones on purpose to arrest the materialistic and political trend (48).

As I mentioned above, the French Revolution gave a turn in the Sunday School Movement, and they started providing religious tracts for the poor and the children.⁴ While considering the chapbooks as inappropriate to the poor, Hannah More, a precursor of the Movement, recognised their popularity, and wisely employed 'format, style, paper and quaint little woodcuts' of the chapbooks in her *Cheap Repository Tracts* (Shephard 1973: 48).

- (5) *Cheap Repository Tracts* is the title of a popular series of chapbooks written in the 18th century by evangelist Hannah More. Cheaply produced and therefore affordable to many, these moral tales were intended to discourage political dissent and unscrupulous lifestyles. Politically conservative, the stories were made more appealing by the addition of woodcut illustrations. (British Library)

The Tracts were published for three years (1795-1798) and were met with success (Pickering 1981: 21). As Scott (2009: 54) pointed out, More's Tracts were intended to replace the 'secular Chapbooks' with 'the religious message concealed within a tale that aimed at engaging the interests of the readers'. It is interesting to note that More's tactics 'raised the eyebrows among the stricter Evangelicals', and The Religious Tract Society believed that her stories were not religious enough (Scott 2009: 54).

In conclusion, Sunday School Moralists such as Barbauld and More, who 'took up the cause of the education of the poor' (Demers 2015: 236), contrived their writing to enlighten the children and the poor with piety. In the meantime, Hannah More's *Cheap Repository Tracts* were meant to be religious; nevertheless, the tracts served the role of entertaining their child readers somehow.

4 Conclusion

In this study, I have tried to comment on the development of British children's literature in the eighteenth century by outlining an understanding of the female writers and their works in those days. Overall, the literature produced by both women writers was overwhelmingly moral and religious. According to Demers (2015), this paper divided the women writers into two groups: Rational Moralists and Sunday School Moralists.

As Grenby (2014) points out, when British children's literature rose throughout the eighteenth century, children's books increasingly blended entertainment with instruction. In this case, Rational

Moralists such as Sarah Fielding and Mary Wollstonecraft and Sunday School Moralists such as Anna Laetitia Barbauld were keen to teach child readers good deeds with ethical lessons, whereas some female authors including Hannah More and Maria Edgeworth strived to succeed in writing something interesting to the child readers' eye. By the mid-nineteenth century, what is called the Golden Age of children's literature had arrived in Britain when literature for children was 'willing to endorse entertainment as a credible goal' (Demers 2015).

Unfortunately, I had to limit myself to looking into the women authors in the eighteenth century who are listed in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. I was unable to look at influential figures such as Sarah Trimmer, who was also an early supporter of the Sunday School Movement. In the next step in my research, I would also like to deal with those female authors in the early days of British children's literature.

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Notes

¹ Traditional folklore includes fables, fairy stories, chivalric romances or ballads and tales collected in short pamphlets called chapbooks (Grenby 2014).

² sister-in-law of Mary Ann Kilner

³ Born Shippen, American journal writer

⁴ Every effort was taken to prevent the lower classes from revolting against the royalty in England.

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