

All Work and No Play? Materiality and Interactivity in Eighteenth-Century Girls' Education and Literature

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ABSTRACT

An increased standard of living in eighteenth-century Britain contributed to a view of childhood as an impressionable age group distinct from adulthood and infancy. As this age was seen to be critical in the formation of personal identity and social responsibilities, the methods of teaching young girls and boys to read experienced major developments, that were inspired by John Locke, and meant to help to raise the ideal citizen. Arguably, the most successful method of teaching was through John Newberry's books, which combined literacy lessons with social instruction through the inclusion of gendered material objects, a toy ball or a pincushion, with which the reader could interact. This paper argues that Newberry's book-toy bundles successfully instilled lessons of femininity and proper conduct within young female readers through their qualities of interactivity. Through the application of Lockean pedagogical views to these products, an underlying emphasis on materiality and personal experience is exposed in Newberry's educational strategies. By connecting physical interaction to the text they read, the lessons girls are taught become enforced through habitual performance and daily use of their Newberry objects. Through an analysis of the independent lessons girls underwent in order to become proper women of British society and the social qualities that these ideal women were expected to have, we can achieve a better understanding of life for women in the eighteenth century and the importance of experiential learning in the development of young minds.

The eighteenth century saw the invention of the concept of childhood, a group now distanced from adults and infants, lacking in mature intellect and physical strength yet still possessing the capacity to reason and an impressionable personality. As this was considered an age important for development, the genre of children's literature advanced rapidly, generating fierce debates and culture wars concerning pedagogy intended to produce proper, contributing societal members. Entertaining and simple stories became a crucial mechanism for moulding young readers into British citizens whose actions and aspirations were controlled and harnessed by the societal status quo. An influential figure in this field was publisher John Newberry, who sought to engage children

with books sold in conjunction with interactive objects, imparting that lessons can be taught alongside a text, not solely within them. Children's literature and methods for education become important to studies of the eighteenth century, then, as they represent what adults approved of for children to read, revealing the dominant culture within which they were written. Noteworthy is literature for young girls, for while both the gender and age of this group may seem to remove them from any significant historical contribution, especially strict standards of behaviour were taught through girls' literature. By examining the media that young girls consumed, questions about men's political dominance, the roles women were supposed to play, and the roles they chose can be answered.

This paper will consider the social construction of adolescent femininity in relation to toys and functional objects packaged with John Newbery's eighteenth-century children's books. In doing so, I analyze the development of children's didactic, instructional literature, and its resulting pedagogy, starting with the Lockean theories which are the first monumental consideration of childhood. I then attempt to establish the relationship between female education and the aspiring goals in these educational techniques with dolls, pincushions and ledgers that were included in many Newbery books. Through this analysis, I argue that eighteenth-century girl's toy-book hybrids reinforced society's limitations, despite the freedom for learning these interactive objects provided. Adolescent girls were shaped through this range of print and material culture, most effectively through the materiality of the objects with which they engaged.

The unformed state of the child's mind made the acquisition of poor manners at an early age an alarming possible outcome for eighteenth-century parents, and so the conditions of childhood were of interest to many. Seventeenth-century bishop John Earle presents theories on the character of youth in his 1628 *Microcosmographie*. Earle's views emphasize the belief in a child's innocence, describing them in his opening pages as "nature's fresh picture newly drawn in Oyle, which time and much handling dimmes and defaces."¹ Similarly and most well-known

1 John Earle, *Microcosmographie; or A Piece of the World Discovered; in Essays and Characters*, ed. Philip Bliss (London: White and Cochrane, 1811), 1-2.

was John Locke's notion of an age of reason at which children mature into adults and consent to contribute to society. The mind of the child was similar to "man in his natural state," described in *Two Treatises of Government*, unharmed by the negative influences of society. Locke's description of the infant mind as malleable wax set the standards for the pedagogical paradigm of the eighteenth century. Starting from a position of equality with an uncorrupted mind, prosperous children would be those who received the best education and acquired the most useful skills and knowledge. Locke's 1693 *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* acknowledged the benefits of producing a children's literary genre. His plans for the education of children stress the responsibilities of parents, who should only expose children to the finest and most logical influences due to their impressionability. Locke argues that a parent's role is to become both guardian and companion while supervising activities, providing discipline when necessary. He stresses that children must be directed into situations of education and understanding without being pushed into particular knowledge or personal beliefs, an understandably difficult role for a subjective parent to undertake. Instead, Locke wants parents to provide children with opportunities to explore the world through inquisitive recreation, involving the appreciation of "folly, playing, and childish actions," regardless of whether such activities appear educational.² He believes that fundamental to effective education is the guidance of entertainment to applied, productive ends. He suggests to parents that they encourage "a love and esteem of knowledge; and to put them in the right way of knowing and improving himself," which reflects his goal (and that of children's literature writers) to lead children towards becoming independent and hard-working adults.³ Underlying the majority of the lessons taught are universally applicable messages such as respecting adults, following conduct by example, and taking responsibility for one's actions.⁴

Locke distinguishes himself from his contemporaries through appeals to experiential, kinesthetic learning for children, over an isolated schoolroom education. In his chapter "Of Solidity," he writes: "If any one asks me, What this Solidity is, I send him to his Senses to inform

2 John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, (Edinburgh: J. and R. Tonson, 1752), 72.

3 Locke, *Concerning Education*, 37.

4 Locke, *Concerning Education*, 43-44.

him: Let him put a Flint or a Foot-ball between his Hands; and then endeavor to join them, and he will know.”⁵ If a child does not understand solidity conceptually, then surely they will understand it when applied to real world interactions. He also advises that reading the entire Bible, with messages far too mature for a child, will improve neither their reading skills nor their principles.⁶ Locke’s major concern is not the child’s literacy, but their understanding of the text, achieved through methods beyond reading and comprehension of words. Locke’s work wishes for the reader to critique, apply, and reflect upon the text, or as Locke metaphorically describes it, to “digest” the work.⁷ With the impact of Locke, eighteenth-century toys tended to have an educational element in order to replicate this process. In a child’s mind, where they see their house as their kingdom and their parents as king and queen, a child experienced imperialistic society at an early age. This mentality was nurtured through the acquisition of toys, a child’s first property, in which ownership and proper maintenance was their responsibility and taught through play.

While infancy was genderless, once a child was capable of reasoning and interaction, gender divisions were recognized. The young girls of the British Empire spent most of their time in the company of other women in domestic communities.⁸ Household responsibilities and much of their domestic training were undertaken under the guise of play; girls learned to sew by tailoring dresses for dolls and they learned to cook by hosting tea parties for themselves, playmates and dolls. A depiction of an adult but geared toward girls, a doll signifies maturity but embodies childhood. Exhibiting the ideal body shapes of the eighteenth century, girls could foresee in maturely dressed dolls the women they would become. Dolls were also a valuable source of practical education. A good wife needed to possess child-rearing skills and so dolls functioned as maternal study tools in the experiential learning methods Locke highlighted, providing models for exploration, learning, and imitation. Like their brothers, girls were permitted to attend school, but girls were discour-

5 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 126–27.

6 Locke, *Concerning Education*, 261.

7 John Locke, *Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, ed. Ruth W. Grant and Nathan Tarcov (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996), 187–88.

8 Anna Szabo, “19th Century Girls’ Literature: Stories of Empowerment or Limitation?” (PhD diss. Georgetown University, 2009) 6–9.

aged from pursuing a rigorous education which would interfere with their domestic duties. An article entitled “Female Education” published in *The Mother’s Magazine* in 1848 advised women to limit the time their daughters spent in the classroom in favour of their household responsibilities, arguing that education became useless after marriage:

... let her seek a thorough practical understanding of those principals of which she may as a wife, mother, and housekeeper, be called to make daily use.

... The piano, and the brush, should never take the place of the needle- nay, even of the broom or the rolling pin.⁹

However, parents, in true Lockean fashion, did not wish to force lessons or instructive situations (within the household or classroom) upon their children and so the growth of gendered children’s literature provided useful methods for girls to independently ascertain their domestic social role.

The only books for children printed in England prior to this time were fifteenth and sixteenth century language textbooks such as *Orbis Sensualium Pictus*, not designed for early readers in terms of vocabulary and syntax, but nevertheless aimed at children.¹⁰ Inspired by Locke, John Newberry believed that children learned best through delight and entertainment, a view that provided the enterprising publisher with a widely accepted pedagogical model to underpin his sales campaign.¹¹ Newberry’s 1744 *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* presents a series of short lessons on childhood activities that outline acceptable guidelines for good behaviour. The specificity of these entries is reflected in the first page of “Behaviour when Abroad”, which emphasizes a polite demeanor when conversing with strangers and cautions one not to draw attention to oneself in public.¹² Numbered sequences of lessons continue for several more pages, including “Children’s Behaviour at the Meeting House,” “Behaviour when at Home,” and “Behaviour in (Parental) Discourse.”

9 Szabo, “19th Century Girls’ Literature,” 13-14.

10 Margaret Kinnell, “Sceptreless, Free, Uncircumscribed? Radicalism, Dissent and Early Children’s Books,” *British Journal of Educational Studies* 36.1 (1988): 49-50.

11 David Skinner, “A Critical and Historical Analysis of Charles and Mary Lamb’s Tales from Shakespear and Thomas Bowdler’s The Family Shakespear” (PhD diss., University of Sheffield, 2011) 33-34.

12 M. F. Thwaite, *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* (Facsimile ed. London: Oxford U.P., 1966) 117.

Newberry envisions the world as, what Anna Szabo identifies, a meritocracy, where people rise or fall in reputation depending on good behaviour and piety.¹³

With each copy sold, Newberry offered customers an accompanying ball or pincushion, depending on the gender of the reader. A letter from fabled chapbook hero “Jack the Giant-Killer” to the young female patron spells out the use of this product tie-in as a means of moral development, knitting the object to the text:

I have here sent you a Little Pretty Pocket-Book, which will teach you to play at those innocent Games that good Boys and Girls divert themselves with... But then, my dear Polly, in order that you may be as good as possible, I have also sent you a Pincushion, the one Side of which is Red, and the other Black, and with it ten Pins... and for every good Action you do, a Pin shall be stuck on the Red Side, and for every bad Action a Pin shall be stuck on the Black Side. And when by doing good and pretty Things you have got all the ten Pins on the Red Side, then I'll send you a Penny, and so I will as often as all the Pins shall be fairly got on that Side. But if ever the Pins be all found on the Black Side of the Pincushion, then I'll send a Rod, and you shall be whipt as often as they are found there. But this, my Dear, I hope you'll prevent by continuing a good Girl, that every body may still love you, as well as Your Friend, Jack the Giant-Killer.¹⁴

The structure of this book and pincushion package suggests the Lockean importance of the experiential and material alongside the linguistic and mental activity of reading. As the fantasy character Jack engages with the reader's creativity, the referenced pincushion sold physically with the book places the lesson in real life. As Heather Klemann suggests, the pincushion becomes a physically present, visible marker of their owner's virtue, emphasized through the fictional narrative of Jack.¹⁵ Ethical concepts can be difficult to grasp through words, so children could understand this aspect of personhood by interacting with a material, tangible object. The book's material status engages the reader not only with words, but also with an interactive object that communicates through

¹³ Szabo, “19th Century Girls' Literature,” 27.

¹⁴ Thwaite, *Little Pretty Pocket-Book*, 19-22.

¹⁵ Heather Klemann, “The Matter of Moral Education: Locke, Newberry, and the Didactic Book-Toy Hybrid,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 44.2 (2011): 224-226.

its substance more effectively than with pure words, especially to young readers still developing reading skills. The very title of the book demonstrates this, as it is called *a* “Little Pretty Pocket-Book,” not *the* “Little Pretty Pocket-Book.” It is only one of many pocket-books, its materiality as a commodity emphasized.

The pincushion given to girls embodies the Lockean encouragement of toys. Though according to contemporary standards pincushions might be seen as unexciting craft items, historian Mary Beaudry writes that “many pincushions were probably made by women at home as a pastime or as gifts.”¹⁶ As seen earlier, young girls were expected to develop sewing skills for dolls, acting as surrogate mothers by constructing garments for their doll-child. And so though practical domestic items, pincushions were also prospective toys. On a creative level, they could also embed coloured pins into the pincushion to create artistic designs. Both sensible and fashionable, the pincushion indicates the preparation and foresight of young women who always have pins with them. Newbery’s pincushion then assumes many functions, as sentimental token, prized tool, and creative object. Regardless of the side of the Newbery pincushion its pins are embedded in, as described by Jack in his letter, the child enjoys a toy that advises her to behave and also encourages neat dressing, two important roles for women as promoted in other children’s literature espousing gender roles.

In *The Important Pocket Book*, published in 1765, Newbery uses the functional properties of *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* in the form of a ledger that tracks monetary and moral transactions.¹⁷ This too uses pedagogical theories from Locke, aimed towards older, more literate youths adept in writing. In his works, Locke encourages parents to instruct their children in keeping financial accounts.¹⁸ In using the ledger, an experiential lesson is taught: in order to have a respectable reputation, one must display positive moral behaviour; and to gain value from a respectable reputation, one must be active in society. A portion of the ledger of a fictional character, Master Meanwell, is inserted into the Important

16 Mary Beaudry, *Findings: The Material Culture of Needlework and Sewing* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2006), 31.

17 Klemann, “Matter of Moral Education,” 232-233.

18 Locke, *Concerning Education*, 319-320.

Pocket Book to demonstrate the process. Pages are numbered for the days of the week, and money given and spent is recorded in separate columns with descriptions of the transaction in each row. Following this page is the ethical account with two columns: one labeled “good” and the other “bad.”¹⁹ This ledger, already a textual object, takes on narrative-like qualities once the columns have been written in. Because owners of a moral ledger must reread entries in order to reflect upon and alter behaviour, it is the recurring utility and materiality of the ledger that makes it beneficial for children. It provides readers with tools to record every event and coin spent in their day, accompanied with amoral guide with which to navigate socially through British urban centres. Girls of the eighteenth-century middle classes would have normally received an allowance to spend and so keeping personal financial records would have been a great experiential learning opportunity for them, training for managing future household accounts.

In order for scholars to understand the importance of objects in engagement for the discourse of children’s education, we must understand what Newbery seeks to instill in his readers. Eighteenth century girls’ literature and its accompanying educational objects should be assessed for what they show of the social situation of Britain and how society evolved. Gender roles were strict, forcing girls into a domestic, sheltered life, but the goals of books were to mould these impressionable minds into figures that would contribute to and support their society. Newbery, experimenting with the material composition of children’s books and experiential learning tools, guides young female readers toward reflection on the physical object they hold in their hands, emphasizing the expected values of femininity. Furthermore, educational books had a role not just in teaching children the basics of literacy, but in the development of social identity. The child reader is not being merely instructed, but is being trained or prepared to fulfill the role of English citizen. It is clear that the interactivity of book-toy hybrids and educational play through pincushions and dolls proved to be an effective form of experiential learning for girls. When considering the popularity of eighteenth-century children’s literature - read in many homes not only by children but by entire families - one can only conclude that, despite

19 Klemann, “Matter of Moral Education,” 235-236.

strict gender constructs created through its lessons, the genre provides qualities of independence, critical thinking and practical lessons to its readers.

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