

Mary V. Jackson

# Engines of Instruction, Mischief, and Magic



*Children's Literature in England  
from Its Beginnings to 1839*

Mary V. Jackson

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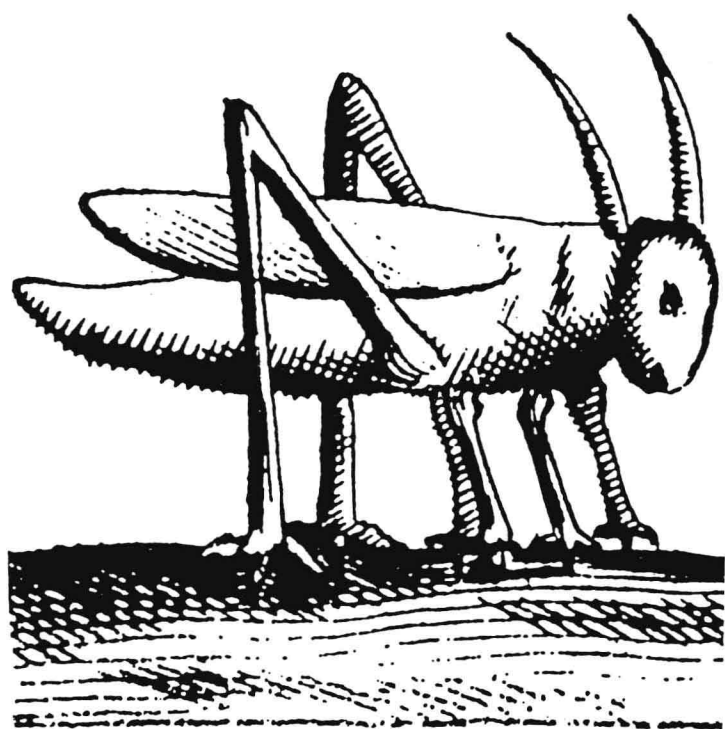
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To my husband, Raymond,  
&  
my daughter, Mary Harriet



## Preface

**W**hen I first considered a suggestion that I write a history of English children's books before 1900, I was uncertain that it could be done or, given F. J. Harvey Darton's monumental *Children's Books in England* (1932), that it needed doing. What of significance could be said that he had not already said so eloquently? And if there had once been anything left to add, had not Mary F. Thwaite in fact done so in her splendid history, *From Primer to Pleasure in Reading* (1963; revised ed., 1972), or if not she, then Brian Alderson, in the superbly revised third edition of Darton (1982)? To be sure, heretofore unknown books and publishers have come to light, and of course Darton, Thwaite, Percy Muir, Francella Butler, and the other pioneers in the field have not pretended to have discussed everything, but did the new material or any new approach actually justify a reevaluation of the field? Such were my misgivings.

Although there have been several important learned books since Darton's and Thwaite's, few are scholarly histories of the field: To cite only three examples that have proved especially helpful, Victor Neuburg's *The Penny Histories* (1968) and *Popular Education in Eighteenth-Century England* (1971) provide crucial bibliographical data on the chapbook industry and the corollary issues of its readership and the nature and extent of literacy among the poor. And Samuel F. Pickering's erudite *John Locke and Children's Books in Eighteenth-Century England* (1981) tackles a vast and complicated body of material from a specialized angle, illuminating many previously half-understood and misunderstood matters. But it was not meant to account fully for this huge motley of a field.

As I pursued my research, which had begun with the study of the debts of Blake and other English Romantics to a variety of children's books at the British Library, what convinced me there might be some

value in retelling the story of these fascinating works were numerous questions, the full answers to many of which were not to be got by reading studies in the field. The questions were of two general sorts: First, what were the various conditions and events, beliefs and ideas, that lay behind book trade developments, and how thoroughly did they account for the trade's evolution? Could we determine some of the manifold influences over the years that induced writers to express the attitudes they did and to give their books a specific form? And second, when, how precisely, and with what consistency did children's books come under the influence of adult literature (or influence it in turn)? Could one, moreover, discern systematic, coherent connections between ideological or literary developments in children's books and the larger socio-political context, connections pervasive enough to require a general rethinking of the history? The first sort of query involves matters that ordinarily concern social historians; and the second sort concerns mainly literary historians. Yet both are inextricably interwoven in the story of books for children, and, I felt, neither—let alone the two in concert—had been adequately addressed. These I set out to understand.

Darton had created for twentieth-century readers an intimate sense of over three centuries of juvenile literature based on his vast firsthand knowledge of innumerable books, his practical experience as a publisher, and his family's long history as publishers and creators of books. To these were added his wide knowledge of literature, his superb taste, the charming spirit of the best of a bygone age in his style, and as Brian Alderson points out, a maturity that was the fruit of a long and distinguished career. From Darton's pages, many modern readers first learned of some book's existence, of now defunct publishing firms, and of long-abandoned publishing or printing practices. To this day, his work remains indispensable as an orienting beacon to thousands of works and hundreds of publishers and authors.

The second scholarly history, Mary F. Thwaite's *From Primer to Pleasure*, is also suitable for the general reader, though originally intended for librarians. It cogently charts early developments in children's books from various forms of adult literature, contains aperçus into the society from which they sprang, provides a number of exceedingly fine though discrete literary analyses, and is moreover replete with superb bibliographies. However, since it was not Thwaite's intent to delineate systematically the interconnections between the social, political, and economic



contexts in which children lived and out of which the books proceeded, her explanations of particular developments do not focus on or derive from a theory of coherent progression in the field. She explores the causes of a number of phenomena, but her greater strength lies in the clarity of her descriptions of them.

Yet at every point in its early history, children's literature was rooted in the conditions and imperatives of the adult world and was regarded first and foremost as a tool to shape the young to the needs of that world. If we would truly understand what it is "about," we must master both its overt and hidden texts, its plain statements as well as its tacitly understood messages and veiled directives. To do this, we must apply a thorough knowledge of the field of value and action from which the literature sprang.

In contradistinction to both Darton's and Thwaite's works, the basic premise of this interpretive history is that major developments in children's books reflect diverse influences from the adult world and reflect the nearly universal assumption that children were resources to be molded or engineered to needs and specifications determined by a prevailing social standard. Since the books did not spring up *ex nihilo*, we profit from the application to this field of what is known through our major disciplines and through contemporary documents—diaries, biographies, familial guides, and the like—about life and art in the period.

Given these assumptions, it follows that I propose somewhat different interpretations of both events and trends in the literature from those of earlier historians. For example, my discussion of the role of Puritan books in the field (chapter 2) does not focus on the anomalies of the group that produced them but explains what Puritan writers had in common with their more orthodox fellow citizens, and how and why Puritan values eventually prevailed in the nation's juvenile literature. My analyses (chapter 3) of the effect of chapbooks on the early book trade and the related matter of the role of Felix Summerly and *The Home Treasury* (chapter 10) differ from Darton's. The prevailing class bias of his time prevented him from assessing fairly, I feel, the cultural and marketing implications of chapbook popularity. My appraisal of John Newbery's literary innovations and perhaps unconsciously radical social schemes (chapter 4) differs from any in print that I know, as does my reinterpretation of similar issues in John Marshall's career (chapter 5).

Likewise, though I use some of Thwaite's literary categories, my unraveling of the role of Trimmer, Fenn, and religiously orthodox children's book reformers, as compared to so-called Rousseauist reformers (chapters 7 and 8), yields another explanation, one derived from my elucidation of shared motives fueled by larger sociopolitical events (class strife exacerbated by the French Revolution and Jacobin menace) that overrode religious differences likely otherwise to have divided fervent Anglicans from an ostensibly anti-church party. Instead, events drove these allies to use similar strategies and to reject attitudes and books judged inimical to the establishment. Furthermore, although I naturally urge reevaluation of some forces that shaped juvenile books over two centuries, I also endorse earlier historians' perceptions when they seem valid. Yet even when iterating what has been long agreed to or known, I attempt to qualify raw or discrete data by establishing their true perspective in relation to other facts.

Predictably, the investigation of the sociopolitical elements that shaped children's books yielded a more fully systematic and coherent evolutionary account than could the inquiry into adult esthetic and literary influences. Prior to 1860 or so, there were few books for children of true literary distinction. Though more fragmented, literary influences are nonetheless significant and have received particular attention here. Typically, my aim has been to discover what was adopted from adult polite literature and why, how it was tailored to its new role, how precisely it fit the borrower's propaganda needs, and what artistic leavening it infused, if any.

Thus, my book explains, for example, reasons for the wide use of the tour motif in early books and its comparative lack of success (chapter 4); the rise of the children's trade novel, from miscellanies and from the first juvenile magazine, and its later disfavor (chapters 3 and 4); the borrowing of the picaresque form of works like *The History of Pompey the Little* and *Chrysal; or, The Adventures of a Silver Guinea* and the reasons its satiric elements were anathematized, especially in girls' books (chapter 6); the distorting and grafting of Rousseau's ideals to older fictional archetypes and to blacks (chapter 7); the manufacture of propagandistic fiction (chapter 8); how neoclassical influences generated mock-epic poetry for children (papillonnades), which in turn engendered the trade's first body of successful pedagogic entertainments (chapter 9); the effects of pre-Romantic literature and Romantic poetry, art, and theory on children's prose, poetry, and illustrations, on publishers' practices, and

on the rise of juvenile drama (chapters 9 and 10); and how the Romantic ideal of the imagination helped to vindicate fantasy in children's books (chapter 10).

Children's literature, a so-called minor area, is unlike any minor field I know, for the term usually connotes a paucity of authors and works, relative insignificance, and meager esthetic quality as compared to the best of an era. Even to only 1839, children's literature is an enormous field; its significance in terms of influence on major writers is great; and its potential for illuminating the social or human context of major literary periods has barely been recognized until recently.\* It is a scholar's paradise of as yet unexcavated bibliographies and unwritten histories of publisher's houses and also of authors' works in their myriad editions, printings, and issues, from which, as my study shows, one can deduce useful insights into matters of taste and intellectual trends. It contains, moreover, a number of works of imaginative and literary success even before 1840 and of poetic genius thereafter. In truth, it is not a minor field at all. Rather, it has been labeled insignificant and given minor attention because of two still potent social and academic biases—a tendency to discount or devalue culture when related to the world of the child and a rooted disdain for whatever seems simple and uncomplicated.

My study seeks to give a clear picture of the inner consistencies in children's books, and between them and their religious, philosophical, sociopolitical, and trade conditions and esthetic and literary contexts. It seeks to explain those portions of the history of the field that legitimately cohere and to show where and, in some cases, why such systematic connections broke down. Though the focus on the larger social context shifts as events dictate, my purpose has been to follow the thread of influence through the labyrinth of major and minor trends in beliefs, social propaganda, and literary developments and to describe and interpret these in as true a perspective as is possible.

As regards the book itself, I wish to clarify certain decisions: First, my study covers juvenile books from their beginnings to about 1839, an era that drew to a close just as fantasy became respectable and the literature gained undisputed acceptance at the highest social levels. I think the next distinct phase in the evolution of children's books runs from

\* Marilyn Gaull's *English Romanticism: The Human Context* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1988) was released shortly after *Engines* went to press. I have perused but not utilized this important volume, which contains a chapter on children's literature.

about 1840 to 1910, that is, through the Victorian and Edwardian ages, during which a number of masterpieces were produced. I hope to explore this literature in a future volume. Second, I wish to comment on my choice of terms, particularly as applied to social classes. At times I make use of phrases like "the lowly" and "the lower orders," two that were often applied in the age to the working classes and the poor by "their betters." Here, as in other instances where I borrow expressions current in an era being discussed, I do so the better to convey a sense of its character as well as its views and not because I endorse its values or want to patronize any of the human beings about whom I write.

Since I began this research in 1978, I have spent many an hour in libraries and collections and am very grateful for the unstinting help I have received. I wish to thank the librarians and staff of the British Library, the Harvard Libraries, the New York Public Library, the Pierpont Morgan Library, and, for many useful facsimiles, Boys and Girls House of the Toronto Public Library. Vira C. Hinds kindly guided me to invaluable library resources. And rare book dealer Justin G. Schiller gave me much sage advice and help in building my collection of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British, American, and French children's books over the last six years and granted me precious glimpses of rare works and editions to which I might not otherwise have had access.

Like all such ventures, this book could not exist but for the lavish sharing of scholarly expertise and generous encouragement from a number of colleagues. I am deeply indebted to Betty Rizzo, Leon Guilhamet, and Barbara Dunlap for reading several versions of the manuscript. To many others who read and contributed to the final version I owe a debt of gratitude: Samuel F. Pickering, Stephen C. Behrendt, Lois R. Kuznets, Leo Hamalian, Robert Ghiradella, Earl Rovit, Paul Sherwin, Sarah W. R. Smith, Beverly Schneller, and William Crain. I wish to thank Paul Lorrimer and Ketti Melonas for technical assistance in processing the manuscript. Finally, I am deeply grateful to Raymond Jackson for countless readings of the book and for photographing works from my collection; and I am excessively obliged as well to Mary Harriet P. Jackson for keeping me firmly in touch with the real child's world through it all. The flaws in this book are indeed my own, but such strengths as it may possess were made possible by the incredible kindness and unflagging assistance of these, my associates and colleagues, friends and family.

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## I. The Birth of the Children's Book Trade: Economic and Social Stimuli

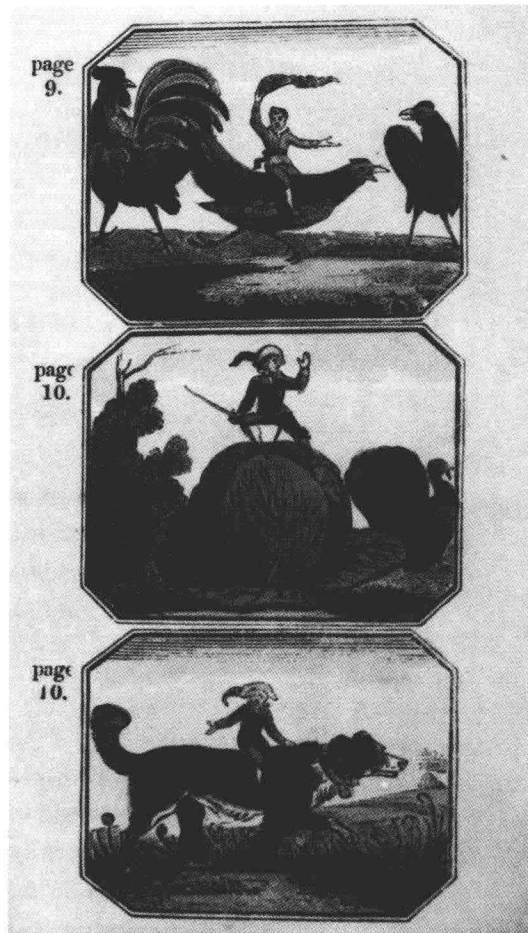
**I**n 1744 John Newbery (1713–67) opened his firm in London at the Bible and Crown and published his first children's book, *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book*, establishing in a stroke, as tradition has it, the juvenile book trade and children's literature in England. Although some leisure books for children were available early in the century, the idea of a business devoted wholly or even largely to them was unheard of. Indeed, Newbery continued to publish school texts and adult books and to sell patent medicines, a steady source of income. In 1745, Newbery moved his growing family and still precarious business to the Bible and Sun, outside St. Paul's Churchyard, and concentrated on making his venture a success.<sup>1</sup> By 1760 the new branch of book publishing was known as a potentially lucrative and growing field for those with suitable entrepreneurial talents. Competitors and sometime copublishers—like Richard Baldwin and Samuel Crowder in London and their associate, Benjamin Collins, in Salisbury—vied with Newbery for the barely tapped market.

It became commonplace to see advertisements, or “puffs,” for children's songbooks and miscellanies in England's many periodicals, like the *World*, the *Daily Advertiser*, the *Penny London Morning Advertiser*, *Penny London Post*, the *London Chronicle*, and the *London Evening Post*. Parents as well as children eagerly awaited these treats: Adults esteemed the literature, the newest aid to forming the character of the young while entertaining them; and children found its novelty and variety enormously appealing. In short, the new wares combined necessity and desirability, a fact publishers and booksellers emphasized in journal ads, touted in the lists at the back of each volume, and hoped would be further reinforced when patrons visited their bookstores. These marketing devices created business, for they kindled the desire to purchase books



1. "Le Maître Chat" ("Puss in Boots"). Charles Perrault, *Contes du Temps Passé*, 1700.

2. "Tom repels the turkey's attack." *The New Tom Thumb*, 1838.



and in time fixed the book-buying habit for a significant portion of most classes. Using clever techniques for advertising to whet readers' appetites, and taking advantage of the newly emerging optimism infecting many, Newbery and his compeers eventually transformed customers into consumers and thus assured the increasing volume needed to build a shaky experiment into a valuable and highly influential trade offshoot.

Over the next few decades the juvenile book trade developed from a minor sideline in many firms into a minor industry. Advertising competitively, great numbers of publishers vied for a share in the brisk sales, and profits were handsome for many. The more prosperous companies had "juvenile libraries," their own bookstores, located in or near their printshops, and these were touted as vigorously as the works themselves in hopes of enticing customers to view the firm's special line of books.

Although publishers stocked their libraries with their own editions of material from the public domain, such as fairy tales, romances, and nursery rhymes, their fame and thus their profits depended greatly on their special line of books. These were built up as firms reprinted every saleable original work they had ever published while adding fresh material at regular intervals. Generally, new offerings floated for holidays were aimed to entice new consumers to splurge. Thus, Christmas, New Year's, Twelfth Day, Valentine's, and May Day became customary dates for issuing "brand new" works, many of which in fact contained familiar tales, riddles, and fillers within the framework of a catchy new gimmick, to stimulate the buying habit.

In the early decades of their history, juvenile books were thoroughly controlled by trade or business interests and not, as one might think, by religious or educational ones. It was not uncommon for publishers to collect, edit, or even write their own material. Most also hired professional authors of real talent, like Oliver Goldsmith, commissioned by Newbery to write a history and probably *Goody Two-Shoes*, or like Christopher Smart, probable author of *The Lilliputian*.<sup>2</sup> Yet no matter who did the actual writing, the books were often conceived, printed, and sold under one person's guidance. Most books had no pretension to literary excellence. Being wares in every sense, they usually hewed to prevailing tastes and values; publishers sought to supply their patrons or patrons' parents with what they wanted, not to reshape their views, as would reformist authors after 1780.

In essence parents wanted their offspring to be taught, albeit entertainingly, the skills, habits, virtues, and graces the children likely needed to gain success in a world newly perceived to contain opportunities for advancement. A large, diverse body of literature—ABCs, natural histories, Bibles, "moral-financial account" books (which yoked ethical solvency to sound money management), seasonal miscellanies, novels, and polite-conduct guides—was permeated by a new gestalt characterized but not fully defined by four elements: optimism, humor or play, morality, and business. For the first time in books for the young, the venerable Renaissance formula (borrowed from the Greeks) for literature, "to delight and instruct," was thought appropriate. Within limits, fun was not only good in itself but good *for* children, since it sped learning, ensured cheerful resolution, and generally enhanced their prospects.

Childhood was still a serious affair, though less somber than earlier.





3. A pictorial cover from  
a French natural history.  
*Histoire Naturelle des  
Animaux*, [c. 1850–60].