



“To the Rescue!”: A Case Study of the Prefaces to Late Eighteenth-Century Children’s Books

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Abstract:

Within the context of the rise of domestic pedagogy, the approach made by women writers of children’s literature is a substantial contribution to the renowned debate on education, providing women educators with both domestic and literary authority. The traditional view is that these women were participating almost angelically in the educational development of their times; however, this position ignores the fact that these writers were, actually, commercially driven. Hence, their “Prefaces”, “Dedications”, “Addresses” or “Postscripts”, dedicated either to parents or to children, contain several ingenious strategies aimed at manipulating and convincing their audience to purchase their “products”. Therefore, this paper aims at studying the writers’ self-representation by looking at a series of books and their paratexts that were used to create support and help the writers advance their commercial objective. The paper focuses on the selected works of Letitia Barbauld, Ellenor Fenn, Sarah Trimmer, Maria Edgeworth, Mary Lamb and Jane West.

Key words: women writers, eighteenth-century children’s literature, prefaces, commercial strategies, instruction and entertainment, literary market.

In the late eighteenth century, children were often provided with amusingly and delightfully instructive stories written by women who were making their way into print. These women writers were aware of the market: they were not amateurs looking for personal amusement, but rather they were women wanting to be published and looking to earn a

living as professional writers.¹ Samuel F. Pickering regards the publisher John Newbery’s books as “apologias for middle-class commercial activity” (Pickering, 1981:13). The expression “Trade and plumb-Cake for-ever” used in *The Twelfth-Day Gift: Or, The Grand Exhibition* (1767) is originally used to illustrate the link between sweet rewards and profit. In my opinion, the expression stands as a metaphor for the relationship between profit and didactic works, Newbery adding another element to the Lockean combination of pleasure and instruction.

Without the Farmer you would have no Corn, and without the Tradesman, that Corn could not be ground, and made into Bread. Nay, you are indebted to Trade for the very Cloaths you wear, and for the Tradesman you would not have a Shoe to your Foot. Even this Cake before me, which you so long for, is the Product of Husbandry and Trade. Farmer Wilson sowed Corn, Giles Jenkins reaped it, Neighbour Jones at the Mill ground it, the Milk came from Turkey, and this from Spain, the Sugar we have from Jamaica, the candied Sweetmeats from Barbadoes, and the Spices from East-Indies. And will you offer to set a Trade at naught, when you see even a Plumb-cake cannot made without it? (Newbery, London: 1770)

In order to gain attention they understood the need for making their ‘products’ commercially attractive. Hence, in doing so, their “Preface[s]” or “Dedication[s]”, “Advertisement[s]”, “Address[es] to Parents” or, even more directly, “To [Their] Little Readers or Friends” contain a number of strategies aimed at manipulating and convincing their audience to purchase their wares.

The aim of this paper is therefore to analyse the location of women as professional writers within the literary market

¹ Fergus, Jan. 1997. “The Professional Woman Writer.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, edited by Edward Copeland, and Juliet McMaster. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. “Her literary career depended to some extent upon the other women novelists of her time, who created and sustained a market for domestic fiction for women, and whose attitudes towards writing, like Austen’s own, became increasingly professional” (Fergus 1997: 13). Although Jane Austen is a writer who comes after the ones I am focusing my analysis on, I consider that this issue can be applicable to women writers writing before her as I will try to show throughout this paper.

place and how they subtly made use of commercial strategies while aiming for literary acknowledgement. I will bring into discussion the prefaces of *Lessons for Children* (1778-9) by Letitia Barbauld, *Cobwebs to Catch Flies* (1783) and *Fables* (1785) by Ellenor Fenn, or cleverly called Mrs Teachwell or Mrs Lovechild, *Fabulous Histories* (1786) by Sarah Trimmer, *The Parent’s Assistant* (1796) by Maria Edgeworth, *Mrs Leicester’s School* (1808) by Mary Lamb and *The Sorrows of Selfishness* (1802/1812) by Jane West or Mrs Prudentia Homespun. The selected framework is a very significant period as it is marked by important changes at all levels, primarily as a result of the French Revolution (1789-1799) and the years before it, and the subsequent social debate in Britain in response to this revolution.

For this purpose, I will review a number of pragmatic strategies by which these authors attempt to consolidate their appeal to the readers and thereby ensure themselves of greater commercial success.

First of all, the writers talk from their own experiences of mothering and teaching and share their understanding of the processes of children’s learning needs and abilities. For example, Barbauld identifies a lack of books for children aged two to three and takes upon herself the “humble task” (Barbauld 1830, 4) of designing a book with “good paper, a clear and large type, and large spaces” (Barbauld 1830, 3). This shows that these writers empathise with mothers and express their awareness of the difficulties that mothers come across when educating their children. Edgeworth in “Preface, Addressed to Parents” emphasises that only those

who have been interested in the education of a family, who have patiently followed children through the first processes of reasoning, who have daily watched over their thoughts and feelings, - those only, who know with what ease and rapidity the early associations of ideas are formed, on which the future taste, character, and happiness depend, can feel the dangers and difficulties of such an undertaking (Edgeworth 1869, iii).

Acknowledging the demanding nature of such a job, but bearing in mind the long term benefits in children development, Barbauld concludes by saying that “to lay the first stone of a

noble building, and to plant the first idea in a human mind, can be no dishonour to any hand” (Barbauld 1830, 4).

Secondly, the writers also assure mothers of the fact that the ‘products’ had been tested on their own children, pupils, nephews and/or nieces before releasing them to the public, which effectively guarantees their success. In “To My Young Reader” Fenn explains that the *Fables* were written for her own family and *Cobwebs* to “please of a set of children dear to the writer” (Fenn 1783, xiii) and, likewise, Barbauld’s *Lessons* were “made for a particular child” (Barbauld 1830, 3). However, this is not to say that their works cannot be used by other mothers nor “be agreeable to other little people” (Fenn 1783, xiii), on the contrary, the broader aim is “to assist Parents” and enable them to “amuse and instruct” (Fenn 1783, v) their own children.

Moreover, another selling point is that their wares contribute to the wellbeing and prosperity of British society as the aim of the didactic and pedagogical writers of the period was to assign mothers the active role of educating and establish the morality of the “rising generation”. The subtitle of Fenn’s *Fables* “in which the morals are drawn incidentally in various ways” suggests the intention of the book that is to instruct children morally. As Fenn puts it in the “Dedication”, if children assimilate the morals, which obviously are not incidentally drawn, at this young phase they will also be happy as adults. Moreover, in the “Postscript” the writer dedicates her book not only to children, but also to “such Mothers we look up to form the manner of the rising generation; to such women, to save a nation from impeding ruin, by training the youth to virtue” (Fenn 1783, 84-85). Therefore, the role of mothers is of utmost importance as through their instruction they contribute to the wellbeing and prosperity of British society.

As a third type of strategy, the product is compared to other works that are denigrated for the purpose of eliminating the competition. This is at best illustrated in West’s introduction “To [Her] Little Friends”, in which she has Eliza complaining about “naughty doctrines” (West 1812, xiv) now banned from the nursery due to the fact that “they talk nonsense”. West’s rejection of and negative response to Rousseau’s ideas and to the new philosophies are to be found in

the “Address to Parents” where she warns parents of the “fashion [which] determined it to be absurd, preposterous, fanatical, and even immoral, to give children an early knowledge of the Christian religion” (West 1812, v). Eliza enquires whether it is true that children are “free and independent beings” (West 1812, xiv) and expresses her concern about her playfellow, Kitty Logic, who, after reading such philosophers, “now contradicts her governess, and tells stories” (West 1812, xiv).

Furthermore, West’s approach is also different from that of the other writers and her stories are regarded as “too dismal for children” (West 1812, iv). The writer detects a pattern previous to her work of portraying life in “gay and pleasing colours” (West 1812, v) with which she disagrees arguing that “man is born to sorrow, and affliction does him good: it corrects his faults, and turns his thoughts to a better world” (West 1812, xv), counteracting thus not only her fellow writers’ contributions, but also Rousseau’s stand on the original sin. On the other hand, Edgeworth suggests that “it would not be advisable to introduce despicable and vicious characters”, however she does admit that “in real life they must see vice, and it is best that they should be early shocked with the representation of what they are to avoid”, arguing that “there is a great deal of difference between innocence and ignorance” (Edgeworth 1869, v).

Another reference to Rousseau is made in *Fables in Monosyllables* whose preface justifies the choice of fables, as Fenn sees them as an appropriate way of instructing children. Therefore, she rejects Rousseau’s remarks and accusations against the use of fables as they encourage “falsehood” arguing that time should not be wasted “in debating whether or no fable-writing [is] the most desirable mode of instruction” (Fenn 1783, ix). On the contrary, Fenn regards fables as useful especially because they convey morals adapted to the age and needs of the young generations and it is precisely the game of make-believe that entertains young readers and motivates them to follow the good examples set for them in the fables. Wanting to be on the safe side, Trimmer, in “Introduction” to *Fabulous Histories*, warns children to take these *Histories* “not as containing the real conversations of birds [...] but as a series

of Fables” (Trimmer 1815, xii), the aim of which is to inspire “compassion and tenderness” towards animals, transmit “moral instruction” and “recommend the practice of general benevolence” (Trimmer 1815, xii). Edgeworth also reassures mothers that “care has been taken to avoid inflaming the imagination, or exciting false views of life, and creating hopes, which, in the ordinary course of things, cannot be realised” (Edgeworth 1869, vi).

It should also be mentioned that, apart from West, who writes later, the other writers do not attack each other, but rather they acknowledge and appreciate their works, which makes them stand as a united group with a common aim, leading to Charles Lamb’s outburst and renowned curse “Mrs B’s & Mrs Trimmer’s nonsense lay in piles about... Damn them! I mean the cursed Barbauld Crew, those Blights and Blasts of all that is human in man and child” (Marrs 1802, 81-2). The writers’ attacks and criticism are oriented towards philosophers or theoreticians widely read and disputed at that time as mentioned above. Yet, as Barbauld highlights in her preface, each author wrote her book as an improvement on the existing material or as a follow up in order to expand and cover all aspects and needs of children’s literature.

A fourth type of strategy sees writers promote themselves as an altruistic educational benefactor employing their “leisure hours in contributing to the amusement of [their] kind pupils” (Lamb 1809, i) “for the sake of those ladies who have less leisure than [themselves]” (Fenn 1783, vii) They, as educating agents, humbly take upon themselves this task acknowledging the importance of guiding a child’s first steps towards literacy acquisition. Lamb’s *Mrs Leicester’s School* shows a “faithful historiographer as well as true friend” (Lamb 1898, xii) striving to spend her leisure time usefully. The book is narratively innovative, consisting of an artful collection of ten stories narrated by a group of scared and tearful girls recorded by the adult mentor who, interestingly enough, is absent from the stories, despite the misleading title. As Janet Bottoms argues, the girls’ stories can be read on three levels. “The primary experience of the child, the story, to use Blake’s term, of ‘Innocence’” (Bottoms 1997, 120-21) represents the first level, followed by “the story of ‘Experience’ in which the girls analyse

themselves and interpret their accounts, and, finally, there is “the shaping power of the adult author, whose subtly ironic perspective on the social world within which the children struggle to make sense of their lives informs the whole” (Bottoms 1997, 121).

In the “Dedication to the Young Ladies at Amwell School” the author apologetically draws the attention on the “little inaccuracies” that “must be pared away, and the whole must assume a more formal and correct appearance” (Lamb 1898, xii). Despite this, her intention is to preserve their own words and peculiarities of the style and manner of the original storytellers. In this complex novel Lamb shows empathy and the ability to see the world through the girls’ perspective and at the same time provides implicit comments on the relationships between children and adults. What’s more, their narratives have temporary endings; whilst the girls seek a moral for their stories, the situations described are to be placed within a much more complex understanding of the world. As Bottoms suggests “their arrival at school cannot be more than a punctuation mark in a longer story, but it is for the reader to imagine what the story might be” (Bottoms 1997, 131).

The fifth strategy identified here brings us Fenn’s pseudonyms: Mrs Teachwell and Mrs Lovechild, on which the critic David Stoker has carried out a detailed research when looking into works rightly or incorrectly attributed to her.² As his results show, the choice of these “commonplace pseudonyms, which were not subject to any copyright” (Stoker 2009, 63), is not unusual, as Stoker explains “Mrs Teachwell was the name of the governess in her first published work, *School Occurrences* and presumably originated from the Mrs Teachum in Sarah Fielding’s *The Governess*” (Stoker 2009, 50). Later, the writer published works under the name of Mrs Lovechild for two publishers at the same time, however her first publisher, John Marshall, continued using her other pseudonym, which brought about incorrect or misleading attributions associated with her. To my mind, the use of these names is another marketing strategy to appeal to the audience. In addition, Fenn in her “To All Good Children” mentions John

² Stoker, David. 2009. “Establishing Lady Fenn’s Canon.” *The Papers of Bibliographical Society of America* 103(1): 43-72.

Marshall, her publisher, to whom the children should be grateful because “he had begun to print for [them] in a large clear type” (Fenn 1783, xxiii).

Additionally, West also published works under the “transparently moralistic name” (Room 2010, 233) of Prudentia Homespun, which can be placed within the domestic ambit pertaining to women. On the other hand, Edgeworth stresses that it is quality that she is interested in, leaving aside the commercial element, which can be disputed that it is in itself a marketing strategy. She argues that “in a commercial nation, it is especially necessary to separate, as much as possible, the spirit of industry and avarice; and to beware lest we introduce Vice under the form of Virtue” (Edgeworth 1869, v).

If all these strategies fail to accomplish their target, there is yet another powerful implement: making mothers feel guilty of neglectful parenting, warning them of the dangers of letting their children’s education in the hands of governesses, servants or acquaintances, or by subtly taking advantage of scared and vulnerable mothers, making them feel inept, inadequate and/or frightened of being accused of being bad mothers, and thus having their reputation attacked.

In *Fables* Fenn suggests that if women are “fond mothers” they will read these fables to their children and “those who are not interested in the progress and conduct of such dear little people, the volumes will appear contemptible” (Fenn, 1783: 81), a serious accusation and label all mothers would obviously wish to avoid. In the “Postscript” Fenn praises mothers of being capable of blending “instruction and amusement for the benefit of young people” (Fenn, 1783: 83) and fashions the picture of a “perfect Mother” whose traits can be found scattered in all her books.

Similarly, in the case of *Fables in Monosyllables*, both the book’s subtitle – “Dialogues between a Mother and Children” and the “Preface” reaffirm the participating role of mothers. A “judicious mother” (Fenn 1783, xii), to whom the writer addresses herself directly, is a mother who, without abandoning her parental authority over the “uninformed mind[s]” (Fenn 1783, xi), is able to “prattle with her children” and “mingle in their sports” (Fenn 1783, xii). Just like in *Fables* the sense of guilt is present in this “Preface” as well. “Those

who are engaged in educating an infant, will accept them with satisfaction; those who are not, (nor ever were) will despise them” (Fenn 1783, xiii). By making mothers feel a sense of guilt, Fenn also urges them to read fables and to fight against the mockery of others.

In *Cobwebs* Fenn brings into discussion the greatly debated Lockean theory of “tabula rasa”³ and, by doing so, the writer warns mothers to be “cautious what is written upon it” and not let the education of their children in the hands of “fools” who will “scrawl upon it”. It is now time for nurses and common servants not be allowed “to give the first intimations to children” (Fenn 1783, ix) and for mothers to take over. Fenn concludes with the imperatives “It is your business! Mothers! To you I speak!” (Fenn 1783, ix).

These features can also be traced in Trimmer’s *Fabulous Histories* who in the “Advertisement” argues that the bad behaviour of some children is due to “an erroneous education, or bad example” (Trimmer 1815, ix) and the aim of these *Histories* is “to point out the line of conduct, which ought to regulate the actions of human being towards those over whom the Supreme Governor has given them dominion” (Trimmer 1815, ix). Again, the sense of guilt is present, it is the *good* parents who pursue having this text and reading the moralising adventures of the two worlds to their children and looking to provide them with valuable lessons. This idea is repeated on various occasions either by the robin parents or by the human parents. Mother robin comments that “good parents delight to teach their young ones every thing that is proper and useful [and] whatever so good a father sets you an example of, you may safely desire to imitate” (Trimmer 1815, 17) while Mrs Benson excuses the ill conduct of her daughter’s friend saying that “she has no good mamma, as we have, to teach her what is proper; and her papa is obliged to be absent from home very often, and leave her to the care of a governess, who perhaps was never instructed herself to be tender to animals” (Trimmer 1815, 114).

³ Locke, John. 1959. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Vol.1. New York: Dover. p.121: “Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper [tabula rasa], void of all characters, without any ideas: -- How comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety?”

Lastly, Edgeworth also reinforces these warnings and points out “the dangers which may arise in education from a bad servant, or a common acquaintance” (Edgeworth 1869, v), which she exemplifies and corrects in the “Birthday Present” and in the character of Mrs Theresa Tattle.

Notwithstanding this, Lamb takes a different approach and depicts two different kinds of mothers- the absent and the surrogate. At this point I have to clarify and say that I will refer to the stories written by Mary Lamb, seven in number, and not to the three ones written by her brother Charles as they do not serve the purpose of this paper (they lack maternal conflict). Having said this, in Mary Lamb’s stories the maternal guidance is absent, the girls’ narratives portraying a series of imperfect mothers who are either dead or have neglected or abandoned their daughters. This means that the girls are forced to take their education in their own hands: Elizabeth learns how to read from her mother’s tombstone, Elinor uses her dead mother’s room as a study room whereas Ann, through a play she writes about her real origins, loses both her birthmother and surrogate mother. All these dramatic stories make Jean Marsden assert that “in each case, the absence of the mother results in incomplete, inadequate, or incorrect learning” (Marsden 1995, 33) and that “there is little hope of proper education in the home” (Marsden 1995, 42). Nonetheless, Mrs Leicester indirectly acts as a surrogate mother herself and the school represents the place where the girls’ education is to be set on the right track.

Finally, linguistically speaking, the strategic discourse entails imperatives (“Build your system of education”, “Teach them not to expect much”-West), short sentences, exclamations (“Mothers! To you I speak!” -Fenn), rhetorical questions (“Why then do I make apologies for my infantine dialogues?”- Fenn), repetitions of key words such as virtue, moral, pleasure, or amusement, dialogues or conversations between producers and consumers, which was, at that time, the most widely adopted formula, and nonetheless a positive tone. On the one hand, some writers diminish their task calling it humble like Barbauld does, or, on the other hand, they talk openly and boastfully about their abilities as Fenn does in the Preface to *Cobwebs* in which she states that she is “sanguine in [her]

hopes of success among [her] little readers” and thinks of herself as the “mistress of infantine language” (Fenn 1783, vii). Additionally, the two ambits of pragmatics and stylistics, which are, to my mind, embryonic ideas, are going to be discussed at length in my next stage of my research, in which I intend to look at their writing from a professional point of view.

All in all, these benevolent figures, who guide the young and point out the moral to their narratives, use their texts as a vehicle for instruction but also as a form of entertainment. To sum up, either by empathising with mothers, writing in their names due to previous successful attempts in teaching their beloved ones, by uniting their forces with fellow writers and counteracting other philosophers’ thoughts, by using convincing rhetoric and pseudonyms or by making mothers feel guilty for neglectful parenting, these writers therefore astutely employ several strategies through which commercial and literary purposes are intertwined, ensuring that their prefaces are a powerful tool for convincing a potential public to open its purse strings.

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