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GENRES OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Children's Literature, the lesser-known genre of literature, is most recognisable in its modern day avatar of the picture book. The picture book today is an extremely lucrative publishing category, which has almost come to be synonymous with all of Children's Literature. Such is the razzmatazz of the glossy, colourful and ever-mushrooming varieties of the picture book, that it hides the other sober antecedents of Children's Literature. This paper is an attempt to remedy this anomaly by looking at eight lesser-known sub-genres of Children's Literature from the medieval and modern period prior to the twentieth century. It seeks to study the terrain of children's books, prior to the onslaught of the picture book.

Key Words: Hornbook, Chapbook, Books of Courtesy, Fairy Tales

INTRODUCTION

There is no denying that Juvenile Literature is one of the lesser-known areas of the literary artistic culture. Because of this, its full expanse, depth and range have remained hidden from the ever-widening purview of public gaze. If, with a bit of imagination, Juvenile Literature were personified into just one of the several people in a room, it would come across as the most silent, humble and unassuming figure of the lot. He would be such a character who is always present, but is so inconspicuous that no body takes any notice of him. Unexpectedly, this character when and if accosted, surprises his listeners with a rare ingenuity, acumen, prowess, and a vast variety.

The topography of Children's Literature is not a monotonous and jaded experience. It is, on the contrary a land of teeming diversity of literary forms and themes. Regrettably, we did not recognize their potential, and allowed them to perish in the neglect of oblivion. These genres have much been like the unsung heroes of famous battles. However, thanks to the efforts of some pioneers, these genres today enjoy a fully legitimate position befitting their stature; at last their contribution in forwarding the traditions of the words inked is being both acknowledged and lauded. They are also being looked up to for their yet-to-be-tapped promise. Literature has a lot of expectations from them. Perhaps this is just the beginning of a new and exciting phase in the life of English Literature. Some of these genres peculiar to Children's Literature, I have tried to profile in these pages.

1. Hornbooks

A produce of the Norman, Plantagenet and Tudor regimes, these books mingle small dosages of pleasure with pedagogy and therefore are aptly described as being the "the powder of learning with the jam of amusement thinly spread" (Darton).

The hornbook gained entry into annals of the London Stationers in about the sixteenth century . It was a curious assemblage of a printed-paper or scrap

of animal hide mounted on a spear-shaped, or the old butter patter shaped board. This was covered with see-through horn from all sides (Cuddon 338). As for the content of these Hornbooks, they taught the English alphabets, Roman numbers and The Lord's prayer to school goers. The terms "criss-cross-row" and "ampersand" were gifted to the English language by these humble hornbooks (Darton).

The humble hornbook was credited with the task of imparting literacy to children. In the English speaking worlds across the Atlantic, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom, the letters of the alphabet, syllables, short stretches of texts - verses from the Bible, a humorous rhyming jingle, brief morals – were offered to children in the hornbooks (Hunt 162).

The 1609 *The Gull's Hornbook*, published by Dekker, is the most well known example. This work was actually satire in the Grobianism tradition, on the "fops and gallants" of the times, in the guise of a children's book of fine living. The 1549 Latin burlesque by Dedekind *Grobianus: De Morum Simplicitate* provided inspiration needed for *The Gull's Hornbook*. Hornbooks went a long way in forwarding the cause of Children's Literature, and were second only to Chapbooks.Hornbooks were in use till the eighteenth century.

2. Battledores

These were a natural progression of the hornbooks. Very little is known about them except that they were a piece of paper folded into three, containing most of the contents of the hornbooks, with the novel addition of crude wooden illustrations (Grenby 205). Rudimentary alphabet rhymes also were found in these battledores, under the Elizabethan rule.

John Locke (1632-1704) , a champion of liberalism, purveyed an understanding of the child's mind as a blank slate or *tabula rasa*, which was susceptible to influences. A corollary of this was an emphasis on grooming the child's mind in morals and literacy. Battledores became an instrument to instruct the juvenile mind, a "pedagogical plaything" under the Lockean influence (Lerer118-128). Battledores were in circulation till 1840.

3. **Lesson Books**

Not actually making for an entry under genres of children's literature, but because their flavour is important in determining the nature of other entries mentioned, I have included lesson books here.

As hardly any one could afford to buy these books, and they were not even thought to be an article worth the trouble of any purchase, the Medieval Lesson Books were the property of the school, which were lent to students only in the classrooms. Mostly these were either inked manuscripts, or coarse parchments engraved upon with dyed needles and blades. In their content they were all largely theological. Rarely anything of the precious little contained there in, was ever seen beyond the light of theology (Darton). The educational climate was overbearingly Christian, as was everything else in the Dark Ages. In the styling, the Lesson Book came a copper too. There were hardly any literary devices used to make the words of these books lively. Characters were absent, and there was nothing in the name of imagery. The tone was rather dreary and monotonous. In fact the content of these Lesson Books was not in the fashion of a narrative, as it should be if meant for children, but it was more of a poorly written discourse. For the young mind's agility these works were too insipid.

Incidentally, not all the Lesson Books are purely pedagogical. Aelfric, particularly in his *Colloquy*, did bring in shades of artistry to children's Lesson Books. He introduced, dialogue and a hint of fictionality. Thankfully, several imitations of Aelfric, brought some respite to children. Aelfric's innovation set the tone of children's books, which lasted later than the Renaissance. Erasmus, gave fresh zeal to the legacy of Aelfric in the fifteenth century. *Sententiae Pueriles*, a work essentially Aelfrican in spirit, kept being repeatedly read in various versions through the Dark Ages till its last know copy of 1728. The two different *Pueriles Confabulationculae* by Cordier and Evaldus Gallus were found in 1693, with a preface dated 1548 (Darton). *Trivium* and *quadrivium* of adult

scholasticism were also given to children. Alphabets were introduced into the heavily religious curriculum in the sixteenth century .

4. The Conduct Books

These make a sizeable proportion of literature for children in most cultures. Basically Conduct Books are a guide by the seasoned, mature adult, giving directions to youngsters in any sphere of life like morality, behaviour, religion, craftsmanship (Cuddon 173). All these works sprang from an ethos captured by Sancho IV, in *Castigos* which says:

> Men are obliged to instruct, rule and supervise their children, and to give and bequeath to them teachings of good habits and rules, by which they may consequently live and know God and themselves and set an example of good living for others. (qtd in Krueger, ix)

Conduct book were meant for the lay readers and therefore written in the vernaculars. There is a plethora of such literature in from the Middle Ages in Europe. These became a well known variety of literature, even more widely known than the lyric and the romance which remained confined to the courts. Such was their popularity, that son they encompassed all strata of the European society. Of these, therefore, it is aptly said:

> Transmitting the precepts of classical ethics, Christian piety, and savvy behaviour in a variety of forms, these books conserved and rewrote the rules for good living to reflect changing socio-historical realities and to reach new audiences within different linguistic, geographical, and social contexts. As their production moved from royal and aristocratic courts to bourgeois households, conduct books played a major role in the spread of literacy, in cultural education, and in social mobility. (Krueger ix)

Conduct books actually trace their origin to the medieval romance. These romances had a knight undertake a long and arduous journey, which often began with elders, particularly the knight's parents giving him valuable advice to heed at all times. It is such scenes which became the inspiration for the medieval Conduct Books. The Conduct Book proliferated all over Europe. Francesco da Barberino's *Reggimento e costumi di donna,* translated as *On the Conduct and Manners of a Woman*, is a well known Italian example from the fourteenth century (Stoppino 127). The French king Louis IX's hand written letter to his son Philip, containing moral advice moral advice, called *Enseignemen*, translated as *Teachings* is a good example from France (Ashley 4-22). The best-known examples of Conduct Books from medieval England are *How the Good Wijf Taughte Hir Doughtir* and *How the Wise Man Taughte His Sonne* (Sponsler 285). The good wife who is a devoted mother, tells her daughter proper conduct with the following words:

Daughter dear to me,
Some good advice you need to learn,
If you ever want to flourish //

When you sit in church, recite your prayers;
Do not chatter to friends or acquaintances;
Do not laugh scornfully at young or old,
But be of pleasing conduct and of good tongue;
Through your pleasing conduct
Respect for you will increase,
My dear child.

(Sponsler 288)

The Whole Duty of Man (1658) by Richard Allestree, *The Gentlewoman's Companion* (1675) by H. Woolley, Appleton's *Private Education* (1815) are some notable examples in English.

5. Books of Courtesy

A significant and interesting variant of the Conduct Book of the medieval age were the books of courtesy which roughly spanned fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. Much like the Conduct Book and the Lesson Book, these too were attempting to teach the child. However, unlike the Conduct and the Lesson Book, this teaching was neither in morals, nor in linguistic and numeral pedagogy. It was in elegant lifestyle or in etiquettes (Darton). In a manner of

speaking, the courtesy books are akin to the present day lifestyle magazines.

Most of the Courtesy Books very plainly taught courtly conduct, good manners, codes of chivalry and the knight's ideals. In the initial Courtesy Books the medieval flavour of righteous living was blatantly perceptible. During the Renaissance, these same Courtesy Books began inculcating the virtues of the "universal man"- the developmentally well rounded civilized " Elizabethan gentleman" (Cuddon 186-89). Two categories of gentlemen were held high in the common public esteem: first category having names like Sir Phillip Sidney, Sir Walter Ralegh, Cellini; and the second category of Leonardo da Vinci, Sir Thomas More and Eramus.

Embodying the bold and empirical Renaissance spirit, these Courtesy Books were a stark contrast to the ecclesiastical scholastics. They aimed at making "young gentleman" of every boy, and emphasized on the noble living in the present life, not on the beautification of the life to follow after death. The refreshing novelty of a curious scientific temper breathed through these works, when they advocated a life of action and not merely thought.

It is worth a mention that soon the Courtesy Books became much bigger than just simple books of good manners; they matured into full-fledged books on art of living courses for the consumption of the adult, being too complicated for the youth. During the Renaissance, some times these books were so intricately loaded with Humanism to keep in touch with children. Quite a few of them were of high literary merit, and continue to serve Literature till date. Some renowned Courtesy Books are the fifteenth century *The Boke of Curtasye* and *Urbanitatis,* written in verse. *The Knight of the Tower* (1484) is a well-regarded Courtesy Book (Hunt 236 Inter comp 2004). Even Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (1589-1596) is fundamentally an exquisitely composed Courtesy Book.

6. The Chapbook

The humble Chapbook is an eighteenth and nineteenth century development that comes closest to Children's Literature recognized today as a literature for children that aims to regale its young readers and not teach or moralize.

With rampant illiteracy and poverty book publishing was not a lucrative business at all during these centuries. Therefore, cost recovery remained the strongest consideration in the minds of printers. In such a scenario, the chapbook proved to be that panacea which satisfied the printer and the reader alike. Their main customers were the few who could read in the working classes (Ellis 20). The term "chapbook" is derived from "chapmen"; chapmen were street peddlers who, besides other inexpensive articles, like fancy trinkets, also sold the chapbooks. They traveled from village to village attracting prospective buyers with their perky rhymes, songs, dances and colourful costumes. The chapman at the local fare was a huge irresistible attraction for all children.

The chapbook was a single large sheet of paper (often of low quality) folded into eight to twenty-four pages ("What is a Chapbook"). It was more of a printing/ publishing category than a literary one. Most of the chapbooks were anonymously published. As for their content it varied from abridged popular ballads, romances, songs, nursery rhymes, almanacs and was accompanied by crude woodcut illustrations (Cuddons 125).

Initially, these were not meant for children, but such was their appeal that soon a series mainly for children – the Banbury chapbooks - was produced. *Robinson Crusoe, Gulliver's Travels* were also made into chapbooks, besides the usual staple of Native British heroes like Tom Thumb, Hickathrift, Friar Bacon which featured repeatedly in the repertoire of chapbooks (Darton).

Chapbook publishing was akin to the cheap pulp literature of today. It was looked down upon and published by low rung (and often notorious) publishers. Main publishers of chapbooks in Britain during the eighteenth and nineteenth century were Godwins, Joseph Cundall, James Burns to name a few (Hunt 212).

The chapbook holds a special place in the evolution of Children's Literature because with these a change from education to entertainment is perceived in the books dished out for children:

> In the store of the little volumes carried up and down England by the chapmen of the time we begin to see indication of an attention to children's interests, rather than to a forming of manners. The chapmen liked to be called the "running stationers" and for the improvement of the young, they cared very little. (Meigs 60)

7. Nursery Rhymes

A nursery rhyme is a poetic construct meant for young children in the kindergarten. It is more in the manner of an easy song or lively musical chant. Most cultures recognize nursery rhymes in various forms as an important part of growing up. Usually bodily actions and gestures accompany these rhymes. They are believed to have some connection, as far as their origin is concerned, with counting games that children play like *Eeny, meeny, miny, moe.* Rhymes, besides training the slurred tounges of children into clear adult pronunciation, also induce children in a playful manner into the numerals and alphabets, which are the first steps of formal education. Usually sung in groups, these infantile verses nurture a sense of healthy community feeling by sustaining an air of festivity. Therapeutically they serve to provide some light Calisthenics for the toning of the child's fragile body.

Essentially, the concept of nursery rhyme belongs to the oral tradition. These are passed down from generation to generation by the word of mouth. More often than not, nursery rhymes relate a short narrative. They are in essence, very simple.

Nursery Rhymes began to be recorded only in the nineteenth century, but there is evidence of their going back to the Middle Ages (Hunt 227). The most famed collection of nursery rhymes from Britain is the *Mother Goose* collection.

Nursery rhymes range from hollow jingles to verses of some erudition, like "O dear, what can the matter be" which is in a semi-ballad form. The main varieties of nursery rhymes are counting rhymes like "Eeny, meeny, miny, moe", playground rhymes like "Ring – a – Roses", lullabies like "Hush a by baby", riddles and rhymes accompanying some infant amusement.

8. Fairy Tales

A discussion of Children's Literature cannot be complete without the mention of fairy tales. In fact, in ordinary imagination, the terms Children's Literature and fairy tales have become somewhat synonymous, with one implying the other.

Madame d'Aulnoy's, *Contes des Fées,* appeared in France of 1698 and gave currency to the term "fairy tales". The basic defining feature of fairy tales is not the presence of fairies, but "enchantment" and "supernatural element" (Opie and Opie qtd in Gambles and Yates 95).

Histoires, ou Contes du Temps Passés (1697) by Charles Perrault and Madame d'Aulnoy's work are the trend setting early examples of recorded fairy tales from France (Hunt 262). The French success of fairy tales, exemplified by the two works mentioned, influenced the German and the English in the same direction (Hunt 262- 266). Before the Grimm brothers brought out their compilation in the nineteenth century, there were many other fairy tails collections in Germany in imitation of the French fairy tales. In Britain the Puritans did not approve of the fairy tales as they did not contain any Christian morals. However, despite the Puritan denunciation, the fairy tales continued to be surreptitiously available and popular in chapbooks. Most of these were cheap translations of the French fairy tales, particularly Perrault's (Hunt 266). However, Robert Samber's translation of Perrault brought some respectability to fairy tales in Britain because he purveyed them with some diadactism. This started a tradition of fairy tales mixed with moral teachings for children in Britain. Finally, with Lang and Jacob, fairy tales were strongly anchored in the British milieu.

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