
‘To Teach Little Boys And Girls What It Is Proper For Them To Know’: Gendered Education and the Nineteenth-Century Children’s Dictionary

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Abstract

This paper explores the role nineteenth-century children’s dictionaries in the gendered education of children. Children’s dictionaries have been widely regarded as mid-twentieth-century phenomena. Pre-twentieth-century lexicography, meanwhile, has been traditionally regarded as an exclusively male pursuit. Contrary to these assumptions there were, in fact, many dictionaries specifically written for children in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Several of these were compiled by women who drew on their experience as educators. Children’s dictionaries in this period aimed, not simply to impart the meaning of words, but also to provide a social and moral education. This moral didacticism can be seen to form part of an ongoing construction of gender identities for children in this time. As lexicographer Anna Murphy put it in her 1813 *A First, Or Mother’s Dictionary for Children*, to educate was ‘To teach little boys and girls what it is proper for them to know’. Through dictionary definitions, illustrative examples, and pictorial illustrations, girls and boys were constructed in different ways, and as exhibiting different virtues (or vices). Although this paper focuses mainly on dictionaries compiled by female lexicographers, and the ways in which these works addressed female readers, dictionaries compiled by men are also considered for comparative purposes. Similarly, though the discussion centres on constructions of the prototypical ‘good girl’, the ‘good boy’ is also considered, especially since these prototypes were often seen to define each other by antithesis. The extent to which individual lexicographers’ personal and political positions came into play is significant and could lead to ideological patterns deviating from dominant gender ideologies; some female compilers, for instance, actively contested some of the limitations placed on feminine identity.

1. Children’s dictionaries and histories of lexicography

Histories of lexicography acknowledge that the original purpose of English dictionary-making was pedagogical in the sense that early dictionaries were primarily compiled for school pupils (c.f. Osselton 1983: 13-14, Schäfer 1989: 2, Starnes and Noyes 1991: 1, Landau 2001: 25, Béjoint 2010: 62). However, as Béjoint (2010: 48) remarks, children’s dictionaries, though ‘interesting for the metalexicographer’, have ‘rarely been the object of research’. In fact, previous histories of dictionary-making typically disregarded the existence of children’s dictionaries before the publication of American educationalist Edward Thorndike’s (1935) *Thorndike-Century Junior Dictionary*. Children’s dictionaries are not mentioned by Osselton (1983), Green (1997), Hartmann ed. (2003), Mooijaart and Wal eds. (2008), or in the two-volume *Oxford History of Lexicography* (Cowie ed. 2009). Only Landau (2001) explicitly refers to the existence of dictionaries for children before Thorndike, but he does so in order to dismiss their distinct identity as a separate genre of dictionaries. He claims that dictionaries addressed to children in this time were simply smaller-sized adult dictionaries which made ‘no concession to simplicity ... in the treatment of vocabulary’ (Landau 2001: 25).

Contrary to these assumptions there were, in fact, several dictionaries explicitly compiled for children as early as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Not only were these dictionaries specifically tailored for children’s perceived intellectual needs, they were aimed at ‘little boys and girls’ (Murphy 1813). This article argues that such reference works can be seen as part of an ongoing construction of gender identities for children in nineteenth century Britain. Although gender by this time was seen as a ‘natural’ category, moralists also insisted that male and female virtues had to be constantly cultivated and actively maintained. Children’s dictionaries also aimed, as Anna Murphy’s (1813) definition of *educate* in *A First*,

Or Mother's Dictionary for Children suggests, 'to teach little boys and girls what it is proper for them to know'.¹ This paper focuses in particular on monolingual nineteenth-century English children's dictionaries and on the ideological construction of the prototypical 'good girl', particularly in works compiled by hitherto overlooked female lexicographers. The paper argues that both male and female lexicographers participated in the construction of the 'good girl' as a model for female readers. Constructions of the 'good girl' and the 'good boy' typically defined each other by antithesis: what was expected of the good boy was often inconceivable for the good girl, and vice versa. Examples of ideological constructions of 'the good boy' in children's dictionaries are therefore also considered for comparative purposes.

2. Boys and girls as addressees

Title pages, dedications, and prefaces in nineteenth-century word books for children were often remarkably specific in terms of identifying both girls and boys as addressees. For example, Francis Wilby's (1844) *Infant School Spelling-Book, And Pictorial Dictionary* was dedicated to 'the Royal Infants', as the frontispiece shows. Maria Edgeworth's Glossary at the back of her 1801 children's book *Early Lessons* and Anna Murphy's (1813) *A First, Or Mother's Dictionary for Children*, both refer to the readers as 'little boys and girls'.

Lexicography in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been considered an almost exclusively male occupation. However, not only were children's dictionaries addressed to, and used by, both female and male readers, they were also written both by both women and men. Quite apart from female compilers of general-purpose dictionaries, such as Ann Fisher, several eighteenth- and nineteenth-century children's lexicographers were, in fact, women. The extent to which individual lexicographers' personal and political positions came into play is significant, as it could lead to unexpected ideological patterns that deviated from dominant gender ideologies. For instance, Maria Edgeworth and Anna Murphy, as well shall see, actively contested some of the limitations placed on feminine identity, as well as presenting more complex images of masculinity for young boys.

3. The unequal sphere

In many of the children's dictionaries examined, boys' and men's spheres of experience are represented as the norm, whereas women, and especially girls, are less visible. If girls and women are described, it is chiefly in the context of their domestic duties or preoccupation with their appearance. As we have seen, Francis Wilby's (1844) *Infant School Spelling-Book* was addressed to both sexes. Inscriptions in specific copies suggest that it was used by girls as well as boys. A dedication in the British Library's copy, for instance, states that Wilby's dictionary was given to 'Amy Isabella Charlotte' by 'her Papa and Mama on Christmas Day 1847, Calcutta'. Nonetheless, the implied reader in the *Infant School Spelling-Book* is self-evidently a little boy, as Wilby's entry for *man* demonstrates: 'I am a *Child*. When I am a few years old-er I shall be a *Youth*. When I am more than twen-ty years of age, I shall be a *Young Man*'. Indeed, the dictionary contains entries for *man*, *men*, *lad*, and *son*, but no corresponding entries for girls or women.

Girls are also represented only in a few pictorial illustrations in Wilby's dictionary: Out of thirteen images depicting children, only three are girls, and out of twenty pictures representing adults, six are women. Whenever children are referred to generally, illustrations invariably depict boys. For instance, the entry for *sit*, explaining that '[i]n school we sit on forms', and the entry for *mat*, are both accompanied by illustrations of schoolboys. The entry

for *clap* refers to ‘children’, but is similarly accompanied by an illustration of a boy. The prototypical child, these images suggest, is a boy.

By contrast, two reference books compiled by female lexicographers, Maria Edgeworth’s (1801) *Glossary* and Anna Murphy’s (1813) *Mother’s Dictionary*, consistently address both ‘little girls and boys’. Boys and girls are, however, addressed in slightly different ways within these works. Percy (1994: 133) argues that illustrative examples in Ellin Devis’s (1775) and Jane Gardiner’s (1779) eighteenth-century grammar books ‘convey moral messages to ... clearly female readers’ whilst contrasting ‘the male and female worlds’. For example, ‘This is the boy who studies diligently, he will certainly be a great man’ is juxtaposed with ‘This is the girl who wrote the letter, she spells very well’. Subsequent editions of Gardiner’s grammar invited a wider audience; the title changed from *Young Ladies English Grammar* to *English Grammar*, and examples such as ‘My frock is white’, ‘Ah! what a nice doll!’ were changed to ‘My shirt is white’, ‘Ah! what a nice top!’ (Percy 1994: 135).

This dual didacticism, addressing both girls and boys whilst separating female and male worlds, was also at work in children’s dictionaries. The need to adapt a textbook to a wider audience might account for some of the differences observed between the first and third editions of Murphy’s *Mother’s Dictionary*. For instance, the example ‘Little girls may *render* themselves useful in many ways’ (1813) has been altered to ‘little folks may *render* themselves useful in many ways’ (c.1825-30). These changes could also have been made by a male editor since the second edition of the dictionary was apparently ‘carefully rev. and corr. by J. B. Young, private teacher’ (Darton 2004: 478).

In contrast to the portrayal of active and playful boys in Wilby’s *Infant School Spelling-Book*, girls, when they appear at all, are much more sedentary. The only toys assigned to girls in the dictionary are skipping ropes. Skipping was appropriate because it was rendered as a less energetic and more decorous form of exercise: ‘To *skip* is to leap or jump light-ly’, explains Wilby (1844) in his entry for *skip*. In Wilby (1844), the dainty movements of the skipping girl, demurely but attractively attired in an ankle-length dress and a large hat, contrast with the livelier movements of the boy ‘hop-ping’ ‘to see how far’ he can hop in the entry for *hop*. The difference in energy and activity between the ‘good boy’ and the ‘good girl’ is further illustrated by Wilby’s (1844) pictorial representations of *pat* and *pet* respectively. Both the boy and the dog are in action; the boy is commanding the dog and spurring it on. By contrast, the girl and the lamb are inactive; the girl seems to be comforting the lamb. The image evokes the role of females as nurturers and moral purifiers, and creates an idyllic tableau reminiscent of religious iconography.

In contrast to the limited range of activities offered for girls in Wilby’s dictionary, and by educators such as Rousseau, who argued that a girl’s fondness for dolls ‘very obviously shows her instinctive taste for life’s purpose’ (Rousseau 1762: 1290), Maria Edgeworth, in the 1798 *Practical Education*, promoted ‘experimental’ and active play-things for both girls and boys.² She encouraged parents to let children of both sexes examine and play with objects such as air pumps, barometers, microscopes, and orreries. This is also reflected in her 1801 *Glossary*, which defines terms such as *microscope* and *orrery* and encourages children to familiarize themselves with these objects. Although such invitations were largely relevant to privileged children, whose parents had access to well-furnished studies and laboratories, they were nevertheless extended to both sexes. The entry for *barometer*, for example, explains that ‘Little girls and boys may see barometers in many places’ (Edgeworth 1801: 81).

Edgeworth did, however, concede that dolls were useful for ‘inspiring girls with a taste for neatness in dress’ as long as ‘a watchful eye’ was ‘kept upon a child to mark the first symptoms of a love of finery and fashion’ (Edgeworth 1798: 3-4). Girls should be encouraged to be neat, but should be discouraged from a frivolous love of ‘finery and fashion’: ‘that was a foolish little girl who *sacrificed* her happiness and amusement for the sake of having fine clothes’, Murphy (c.1825-30) reminds her readers in her entry for *sacrifice*.

4. The 'good girl' and the 'good boy'

The moral didacticism in children's dictionaries, then, often manifested itself in specifically gendered ways, constructing separate prototypical images of the 'good girl' and the 'good boy'. Children's dictionaries addressed to a mixed audience of both girls and boys had to negotiate frequently opposing moral didactic aims. Boys were, however, represented more often, and as such, were more frequently the target of overt moral proscription.

Lexicographers did not necessarily prescribe any single ideal of manliness or appropriate behaviour for boys. Boys were portrayed as 'naturally' active, boisterous and aggressive, and consequently in greater need of being controlled. 'Boyish' energy had to be channelled through appropriate activity, so that the boy developed 'manly' virtues such as strength and courage, whereas 'boyish' vices, such as cruelty and recklessness, had to be checked through legitimate correction. By contrast, girls, when they were portrayed at all in dictionaries, were depicted as passive and demure. The 'bad girl' was not rough and cruel, but a girl who overindulged her 'natural' vices, such as vanity. Of course, depicting girls as naturally gentle and vain was in itself a powerful prescription of appropriate gender roles, but one that was far more covert and insidious than admonishments directed at rough boys.

As Murphy's (c.1825-30) example for *train* states, "this little girl has been *trained* up in the habits of industry and good behaviour". Murphy's examples also praise girls' pleasing aspects, cheerfulness and good behaviour, thereby promoting these as particularly 'feminine' virtues, as in the example for the entry *conclude*, 'when I see a little girl much beloved by her friends, I always *conclude* that she is very good'. At least one of Murphy's (c.1825-30) examples suggests that little girls can misbehave too, though the repercussions are terrible: 'a little girl who was playing with fire, was in *imminent* danger of burning herself to death' (*imminent*).

5. Mothers and fathers

An important social role for the good girl and the good boy to aspire to was that of parent. Depictions of mothers and fathers in children's dictionaries reminded readers of their present duty towards their parents and also provided models for children to emulate in the future. The ideal of the domestic mother-teacher, an every-day presence, who has 'great influence' over her children is perpetuated in examples such as:

(1) "Your mamma behaves *impartially* towards her children;" that is, she loves them equally, and treats them as they deserve; she does not indulge one more than another (Murphy c.1825-30, *impartial*)

(2) "my mamma has great *influence* over me," that is, she can easily persuade me to do what she wishes me to do (Murphy c.1825-30, *influence*)

By comparison, fathers in Murphy's examples, when they do appear, are represented as proprietors, providers, patriarchs, for instance:

(3) "my papa *provides* me with money, books, and every thing I want." (Murphy c.1825-30, *provide*)

(4) "your father treats his servants and *dependents* with kindness." (Murphy c.1825-30, *dependent*)

6. The good girl and boy revised

Compilers of children's dictionaries could use subtle means to change what was considered 'proper' for little boys and girls. Edgeworth was careful to define 'manliness' in moral and religious, rather than physical terms. In the little story preceding the Glossary in *Early Lessons* (1801), Edgeworth challenges little Harry's prejudices about men's and women's work. Harry is puzzled by his mother's request that he make his bed, since 'he did not know, that boys or men ever made beds', but is subsequently assured by his father's reference to 'manly' activities such as seafaring, that even this task can be performed by men, for 'in ships, which sail on the sea, and carry men from one country to another, the beds ... are always made by men' (Edgeworth 1801: 7-8). Wilby and Murphy both proscribed boisterous and unruly behaviour in boys, and encouraged boys to treat animals, and each other, with kindness:

(5) a boy of generous *spirit* never takes pleasure in hurting any thing which is less and weaker than himself (Murphy c.1825-30, *spirit*)

(6) A good boy will *shun* a-ny play-fel-low who is wick-ed (Wilby 1844, *shun*)

These dictionaries demonstrate the extraordinarily precarious balance which needed to be struck in order for the 'good boy' to develop into a proper gentleman. Boys had to be active, but not too boisterous, brave, but not cruel. The 'good little boy' was always in action, pushing the boundaries, hopping 'to see how far he can hop'. As socially didactic works, children's dictionaries attempted to steer him in the right direction, reining him in or spurring him on as appropriate. By contrast, the 'good little girl' was portrayed as being in stasis, content to be confined within the boundaries of feminine propriety. In many children's dictionaries, boys were depicted as still unformed and developing, whereas girls were depicted as having already reached their (much more limited) potential.

Compilers such as Edgeworth and Murphy, however, found ways to contest these perceived limitations on the female learner. Anna Murphy was self-educated, worked as a governess from the age of sixteen, never had any children of her own, travelled unaccompanied by her estranged husband, and published extensively on art, literature, and women's rights (Thomas 1967: 11, Johnston 1997: 2). In many respects, this put her beyond the pale of the 'proper lady', but Murphy arguably found 'proper' ways to participate in the public sphere of writing and politics. In her writings advocating improved education for girls, for instance, she was careful to articulate consent with dominant ideologies. Most aspects of Murphy's *Mother's Dictionary* also perpetuate such domestic ideologies, from its title, to the definition of *housewifery* as 'those things which women ought to attend to, such as the proper care of the family, &c', and her examples centring on mother-teachers and the pleasant nature of little girls. However, Edgeworth's Glossary and Murphy's *Mother's Dictionary* allocated much more space to girls than other children's dictionaries, such as Wilby's (1844), in which little girls were all but invisible.

Edgeworth, and Murphy all reiterated traditional domestic ideologies whilst encouraging the intellectual development of girls and promoting improved education for women. By not simply rendering 'little girls' invisible, but addressing and describing them alongside 'little boys' in definitions and illustrative examples, Murphy recognized and identified them as learners. Her dictionary encourages both girls and boys to attend to their studies in arithmetic, astronomy, and geography, without overtly gender-segregating the curriculum. Both in their children's dictionaries and in the wider body of their works, these female compilers challenged the stereotype of the ignorant, irrational female language user whilst perpetuating dominant ideologies of domesticity. Writing, teaching and learning for (good) girls were all justified and promoted within this discourse.

Notes

¹ Anna Murphy is better known as Anna Jameson, but her dictionary was published before she married Robert Jameson in 1825. Title pages give the author as Anna Brownell Murphy.

² *Practical Education* was co-authored with Maria Edgeworth's father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth. The preface specifies that Richard wrote portions of the work, but that most of it was written by Maria.

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