

# Impeccable Governesses, Rational Dames, and Moral Mothers: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Female Tradition in Georgian Children's Books.

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## Impeccable Governesses, Rational Dames, and Moral Mothers: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Female Tradition in Georgian Children's Books

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**Impeccable Governesses, Rational Dames,  
and Moral Mothers:**  
Mary Wollstonecraft and the Female Tradition in

# Georgian Children's Books

*Mitzi Myers (bio)*

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If exploring storybooks is no longer the literary slumming expedition it once was, Georgian writing for the young still suffers something like the critical equivalent of urban blight. Hopelessly defaced by injunctions to improvement, commentators on children's literature imply, the moral tale excites a merely antiquarian interest, is necessarily devoid of imaginative force. Only recently was its didactic "yoke" shaken off, one critic asserts: "We do actually believe now that children's books need to be fun and nothing else" ([Lively 18](#)). With a similarly Whiggish view of children's literary history as a progress toward pure amusement and imaginative fantasy, historians typically gesture toward John Newbery as a quaint signpost to freer territories and hurry through the Georgian scene in a single chapter. And that section is mostly devoted to the Perfect Tutor, à la *Émile* (1762) or Thomas Day's *Sandford and Merton* (1783, 1786, 1789).

Even when scholars seriously examine this key period which marked the establishment of children's books as a distinctive genre, they focus on fathers, begetters, progenitors. Sylvia W. Patterson, for example, analyzes Rousseau's influence; Samuel F. Pickering, Jr., makes Locke central. Locke, Newbery, Rousseau, Day, Richard Lovell Edgeworth—these are the ritually invoked parents of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century juvenilia, and the women who quickly appropriated the emergent genre are hardly more than daddy's girls. Thirty years ago, Percy Muir noted the so-called "monstrous regiment" of women who made children's stories a female specialty from 1780 on, remarking that "there is woefully **[End Page 31]**



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This typically educative Georgian mother is wearing the more formal style of the 1780s. (Frontispiece to Wollstonecraft's adaptation of C. G. Salz, *Elements of Morality* [London: J. Johnson, 1791].)

little on the women writers for children who were active at the turn of the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries," and his observation still stands (93). Reviewing recent studies of nineteenth-century children's literary and cultural history, Elaine Showalter finds that "parents" still means fathers, "children" means sons, and even when documenting a decline in patriarchal authority, critics fail to connect **[End Page 32]** their topic to the "increased authority of mothers" she rightly insists on as characteristic of the time (237-38). This authority emerges clearly in the many didactic children's books written for children at the turn of the eighteenth century.

The recognition of such a change is far more important for an understanding of the period than may at first appear. Because children's tales perform a variety of cultural functions, they are crammed with clues to changes in attitudes, values, and behavior. Above all, these key agents of socialization diagram what cultures want of their young and expect of those who tend them. Addressed as much to mothers as to children — "*by the Public the writer means Mothers,*" affirms the *Female Guardian*

(1784) in its dedication—juvenile texts are thus an invaluable resource for students of women's cultural status and literary production. For with the late eighteenth-century expansion of the reading public (much of it more leisured middle-class women), female writers crowded into the juvenile market. Sharing their era's appetite for educational reform, this early generation of professional women found in children's books not just an outlet available to their sex, but a genuine vocation. In their capacity as surrogate mothers, these writing women testify to maternal and pedagogical power. Reflecting the concrete social changes that "greatly expanded and specialized the maternal role," their narrative constructs enact in fictional form the new primacy of the mother, what social historians term a "cultural redefinition of motherhood" (Bloch 114). The characteristic flavor of their didacticism and moral tone, the way they define power, heroism, and social good, all bear the impress of that active and benevolent materialism which was a key component in the period's female self-image. As Muir and Showalter suggest, late eighteenth-century children's literature is in many ways a genre shaped by gender; a matrilineage of nursery novels exists. It...

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