

Written for children: two eighteenth-century  
English fairy tales.

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## **Written for Children: Two Eighteenth-Century English Fairy Tales**

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### Abstract

This essay discusses two eighteenth-century English literary fairy tales for children. The first, "The Dice Box," included by Horace Walpole in his six Hieroglyphic Tales (1785), written for the nine-year-old niece of a friend, probably in 1757, is unique, surreal in its nonsense, Rabelaisian with sophisticated sexual innuendo. In sharp contrast Jane Johnson's "A Very Pretty Story," the earliest known English fairy tale for children, written in 1744 and published for the first time in 2001 by the Bodleian Library, Oxford, who have recently acquired the manuscript, is decorous and benign, and was extemporized by a mother for her two small children. Both authors draw on French sources, particularly on Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy and, in Walpole's case, on Anthony Hamilton, and the article discusses the influence of these on eighteenth-century English writing.

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On 30 October 1756, in one of the many letters that passed between them, Lady Ailesbury told her old friend Horace Walpole: "Missy is sitting by throwing all the ink and sand about, and tormenting me to death to read fairy tales to her" (*Correspondence* 37: 435). "Missy" was Caroline Campbell, then aged eight, the eldest child of Lady Ailesbury's brother, Lord William Campbell. What were the fairy tales for which Missy was clamouring? In 1756 the juvenile book trade had barely begun, and fairies were certainly not a major ingredient of traditional English tales; in these giants were more common. In a letter of 1773 Walpole, signing himself Jack the Giant-Killer, told the five-year-old Lady Anne Fitzpatrick, child of another friend, that he was sending her "the raw head and bloody bones of the only giant I have killed this season." He added that there was little news "but that Tom Hickathrift has had two children in a wood by patient Grizzel, and that Tom Thumb has betted a thousand pounds that he rides three horses at once next Newmarket meeting" (*Correspondence* 32: 174). (Tom Hickathrift, whose strength was herculean, numbered giant-killing among his accomplishments.) This summary is an apt conflation of chapbook titles, and gives some indication of popular themes, but a five-year-old is hardly likely to have appreciated that.

Nor did chapbooks usually come the way of young ladies like Caroline Campbell or Anne Fitzpatrick. This article will look at the fairy stories that



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