

Little Pretty Pocket Books: The Lilly Library's Elisabeth Ball Collection of Historical Children's Material

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The *Lilly Library Annual Report* for 1983-1984 devotes much of its space to what can only be described as a truly magnificent gift: the Elisabeth Ball collection of historical children's materials.¹ This collection, donated by the George and Frances Ball Foundation of Muncie, Indiana, is the single most valuable gift made to the Lilly Library since J.K. Lilly, Jr. presented his collection to Indiana University in 1956.

Elisabeth Ball's collection was begun by her father, George Ball. In the 1930's he bought a substantial portion of the stock of Kirkor Gumuchian, a Parisian dealer in children's books, as well as the private collection of the British collector C.T. Owen. Most of the books purchased from the Gumuchian firm were described in a two volume, illustrated catalogue *Les Livres de l'Enfance du XVe au XIXe siecle* (Paris: Gumuchian and Cie, 1930) which has since become a standard reference work in the field. Many of the books previously owned by C.T. Owen were shown in 1932 at London's Victoria and Albert Museum in the "Exhibition of Illustrated Books for Children" and were described in the 1933 special autumn issue of *The Studio* magazine by Philip James

entitled *Children's Books of Yesteryear* (London: The Studio Ltd.; New York: The Studio Publications, Inc., 1933). After these major purchases, father and then daughter continued to add to the collection.

Writing in the January 12, 1952 issue of *AB Weekly*, Elisabeth Ball answered the question "Why collect old children's books? The reasons are many. There is something intangible in these seeming trifles of the past that makes them so endearing, yet some definite qualities, too." She went on to describe the outward appearance of the materials: their appealing small size, so different from modern children's books; the illustrations of the times, usually copperplate engravings or wood-cuts, which if colored were colored by hand; and the texts themselves—moral tales, stories in verse, and descriptions of far-away lands. She also focused on "the joy of the actual collecting, of having something to look for wherever we go, and then the thrill of sometimes finding the object of our search."²

The assemblage which was the result of these efforts has long been acknowledged by scholars of children's

literature as one of the finest of its kind. While housed in Elisabeth Ball's home in Muncie, Indiana, it was regularly consulted by scholars and cited by bibliographers. During the later years of her life, Miss Ball donated portions of her extensive holdings to several libraries. Her alma mater Vassar College, Indiana University, the Philadelphia Free Library, the American Antiquarian Society, and the Pierpont Morgan received generous gifts during this period. Her gift to the Pierpont Morgan Library was celebrated in their handsome exhibition catalogue compiled by Gerald Gottlieb, *Early Children's Books and Their Illustration* (New York: The Pierpont Morgan Library, 1975), which is dedicated to Miss Ball. Nonetheless, the majority of Miss Ball's library remained in her possession at the time of her death in 1982.

The materials now in the Lilly Library number approximately ten thousand items, including 8,500 books and related juvenile materials such as hornbooks, battledores, paper dolls, games, and toy and movable books, and 1,223 manuscripts. A major category in the collection consists of 2,100 chapbooks, although strictly speaking these are not all children's materials. British imprints compose the largest and most important portion of the collection, with American imprints composing the second largest. French and German children's books are represented with approximately 680 titles and 200 titles respectively. Works in twelve other languages are also present, with Spanish and Dutch titles making up the largest number in the "other languages" group. The books date primarily from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but there are items from as early as the sixteenth century and as late as the mid-twentieth century. Many artifacts of

childhood, once common, but now quite scarce, are present in abundance including eleven boxed infants' libraries and thirty-seven harlequinades which are some of the earliest examples of movable books. There are over 450 eighteenth-century imprints, including 120 books published by the Newbery family. Other important children's publishers are well represented as well, including Benjamin Tabart, John Marshall, John Harris, the Dartons, Dean and Munday, Frederick Warne, and the American Isaiah Thomas. Many of the books in the collection are of great importance to the history of children's literature for they are either unique or extremely rare (perhaps known in only a few other copies).

Quantitative and general qualitative descriptions of the collection as a whole are of course necessary, but it is in experiencing the items individually that the nature of the treasure is revealed. It is not appropriate within the scope of this article to do more than sample some of the treasure, but a few examples will help to give the reader a taste that will undoubtedly whet the appetite for more.

Outstanding even among the several unique items in the group of eighteenth-century materials in the collection is the manuscript nursery library prepared by Jane Johnson sometime between 1735 and 1745 for her son George William Johnson, who later became the High Sheriff of Lincolnshire. There are a total of 438 pieces. In addition to two bound volumes of manuscript text, there are sets of alphabet cards, lesson cards, and story cards. Most of the alphabet and word cards can be used like modern flash cards, with vowel sounds, syllables, short words, and sayings or verses. Many of the lesson cards contain paraphrases of Bible verses. The story cards are largely

secular and contemporary in nature with some traditional verses. The largest subgroup includes seventy-eight word chips, chiefly words for food products, housed in a small handmade paper box, all decorated with playing card symbols cut from Dutch floral paper. The materials are constructed to withstand use by a preschool boy. Two or more pieces of paper are pasted together to form most of the cards. The words are lettered onto grooved lines in black or red ink. Many of the cards have small string loops so that the items can be hung. The materials are very similar to some of the children's books that were becoming commercially available during this period in England.

The first book that many adults can remember is their own copy of *Mother Goose*. Few anonymous poems enjoy such widespread recognition as nursery rhymes. Of special importance in the Elisabeth Ball collection is the copy of *Mother Goose's Melody; or, Sonnets for the Cradle*. Printed for Francis Power (Grandson to the late Mr. J. Newbery) in 1791, this small book is the only known copy of any "Newbery" edition of *Mother Goose* rhymes and is cited or discussed in several works on children's literature, including Darton's *Children's Books in England*,³ Roscoe's bibliography of John Newbery and his successors,⁴ and Opies' *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*.⁵ Between the 1890s and the 1960s, no fewer than four facsimile editions were made from this single original copy.

The name "Tom Thumb" has many associations in popular culture and children's literature. Perhaps the most interesting item in the Ball collection with the name is a tiny book published in London, by C. Corbett in 1746, *Tommy Thumb's Message Cards, of the Greatest Importance to Many Little Masters and Misses of*

Quality. The messages are letters written in verse by Tommy Thumb. The woodcut frontispiece shows Tommy Thumb as a well-dressed boy, quill pen in hand. While the messages he writes are described in the title as being of the greatest importance, the text of the book proves them to be more akin to notes passed in school than polite correspondence. The publisher's ad at the end of the book is of bibliographical significance, for it includes a printed version of the nursery rhyme "Jacky Nory" that precedes the first appearance listed in *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* by fourteen years.

The entire spectrum of illustrations of children's books can be pursued in the Ball collection: from crude woodcuts to Thomas Bewick's masterful white line wood engravings, from early attempts at color printing to the late nineteenth-century work of Caldecott, Evans, Crane, and Greenaway. One of the most beautiful books in the collection is *The Elegant Girl, or Virtuous Principles the True Source of Elegant Manners*. Illustrated with twelve hand colored engravings by "Alais," it was published in London by S. Inman in the second decade of the nineteenth century. After George Ball purchased the Owen collection, he wished to learn C.T. Owen's opinion as to which books in the collection were of the most interest. In a letter, Owen wrote in response to Mr. Ball that it was "very difficult to say . . . it must depend upon individual taste—but for beauty I should think that *The Elegant Girl* should take a front seat."⁶

The success of using picture writing in publishing hieroglyphic Bibles for children in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries encouraged publishers to attempt other uses for rebuses. *Mother [Goose] in Hieroglyphics* (Philadelphia: George A.

Appleton; New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1849) is a clever example. The introduction speaks highly of the book's value for keeping a child quiet. "When a doctor sends for physic for a nervous little chick, make a mistake, and go to the bookseller's and buy Mother Goose in Hieroglyphics; that's what is wanted . . . My word for it, there is nothing like books with pictures, to keep children quiet."

Recognizing the importance of the materials in this collection to scholars in several fields and to all persons interested in the history of children's literature, the Lilly Library applied for and received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to catalogue the collection. The project was completed in December 1986.⁷ The items in the collection were processed, cataloged, and given the same types of conservation and housing treatments as other items in the collection in the Lilly Library. Bibliographic records for all printed items were entered into OCLC. Reports of eighteenth-century items were made to the ESTC/NA project at the University of California, Riverside, and to the NAIP at the American Antiquarian Society. The 2,100 chapbooks in the collection have been treated differently. Rather than catalogue each one separately, a machine-readable index to them was prepared using a commercially available software package (Ashton Tate's dBase II) on a microcomputer.⁸

Elisabeth Ball shared her collection with the scholarly world, fellow collectors, and the general public. In addition to the institutions which received donations of books, she loaned materials for exhibition at the Indianapolis Public Library and at Fort Benjamin Harrison, and when she traveled to Austin, Texas, in 1943, to give a lecture at the University of Texas, she shipped forty-eight books

and twenty-three chapbooks to be put on display. In a further effort to share the Elisabeth Ball collection with a wide and varied audience, the Lilly Library mounted a major exhibition in November 1987. As evidence that gifts seem to encourage further gift-giving, the exhibition received the support of several benefactors. Funds for the publication of the exhibition catalogue *For Your Amusement and Instruction: The Elisabeth Ball Collection of Historical Children's Materials* were provided by the George and Frances Ball Foundation and by the Wendell L. Willkie Educational Trust administered by the Indiana University Foundation.⁹ Installation of the exhibition was funded by The Friends of the Lilly Library.

While the intense excitement of the NEH project and the exhibition are in the past, enthusiasm for the Ball collection continues. Indiana University faculty members are becoming more familiar with the collection's resources and have begun to incorporate use of them into their classes and research. Several excellent thematic exhibitions of children's literature have been prepared during the past year by Bloomington resident and scholar Linda David. With each encounter, these materials which instructed and amused little masters and misses of yesterday continue to educate and delight.

References

¹*Lilly Library Annual Report, 1983-1984* (Bloomington, Ind.: Lilly Library, Indiana University, 1984), pp. 3-8.

²"The Distaff Side of Collecting," *AB Antiquarian Bookman*, 12 January 1952, p. 31.

³F. J. Harvey Darton, *Children's Books in England* 3rd ed., revised by Brian Alderson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 103-04.

⁴Sydney Roscoe, *John Newbery and His Successors 1740-1814* (Wormley: Five Owls Press, 1973), pp. 186-87.

⁵Iona and Peter Opie eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), pp. xviii and 33.

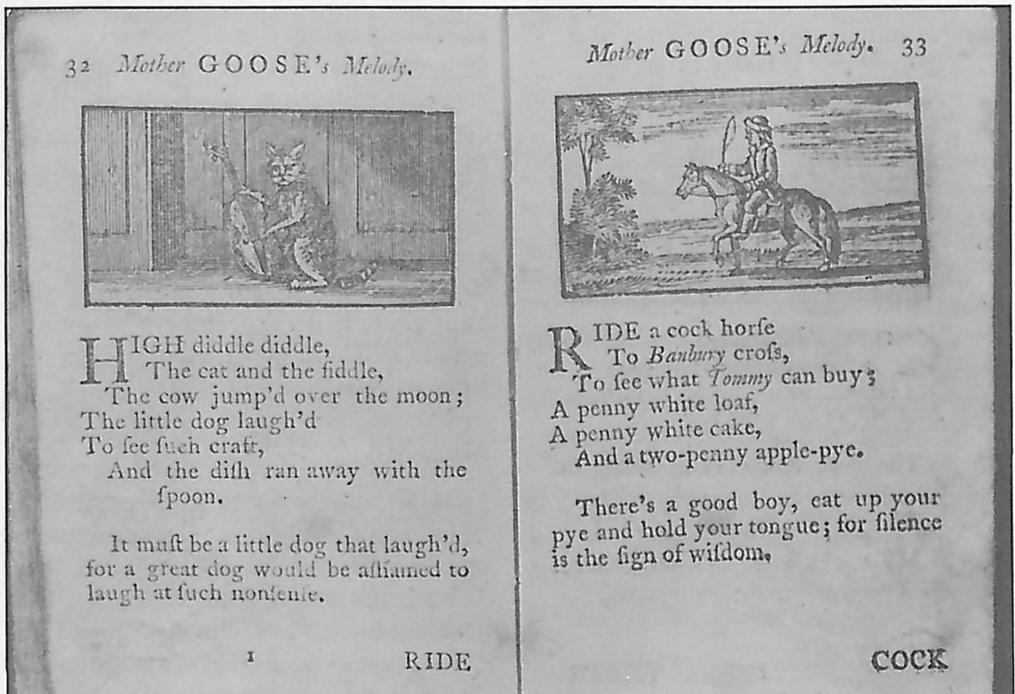
⁶C.T. Owen, Letter to George Ball, 12 January 1935, Ball Mss., Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Ind.

⁷Elizabeth L. Johnson, Final Per-

formance Report. NEH Grant no.: RC 20978-85. Project title: Cataloging of the Elisabeth Ball Collection of Children's Literature. 24 March 1987.

⁸Judith E. Endelman and Diane K. Bauerle, "Computerized Access to a Chapbook Collection," *College and Research Libraries News*, 46 (1985), pp. 342-42.

⁹Lilly Library (Indiana University, Bloomington), *For Your Amusement and Instruction: The Elisabeth Ball Collection of Historical Children's Materials*. An exhibition described by Elizabeth L. Johnson (Bloomington, Ind.) Lilly Library, Indiana University, 1987).



Mother Goose's Melody; or, Sonnets for the Cradle. London: Printed for Francis Power Grandson to the late J. Newbery, 1791. Illustration courtesy of the Lilly Library, Indiana University.