

Play with a Purpose:

The Moral, Philosophical, and Societal Value of
Child's Play in John Newbery's *A Little Pretty Pocket-
Book*

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"Parents just don't understand," as the French Prince well knew, but capitalist markets apparently do. John Newbery's *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* (1744) demonstrates industrial capital's construction of the child in the image of ascendant commercial values, which Taylor Simon brilliantly characterizes in terms of a "marketplace of morality." Her essay's central argument is astute and ambitious, deftly highlighting how the Enlightenment epistemology of John Locke shapes what and how the market aims to teach children. One of our main interests in ENGL 2238 was to chart changing constructions of childhood, which this essay eloquently explores, contextualizing Newbery's foundational book as marking "a clear move away from strictly Puritan and religious views as the lessons in the games appear to focus on making the children more valuable members of society as opposed to trying to save their souls from eternal damnation." To borrow phrasing from her title, this is an argument "with a purpose"—to deepen our understanding of what lessons lie within child's play.

—Dr. Geordie Miller

The genre of children's literature is challenging, as adults make assumptions about what is valuable for children to learn and assume that they will absorb these lessons from the reading materials. The idea of childhood has evolved over the years, as there has been more emphasis placed on preserving children's innocence in addition to forming their morality. Thus, books that appeal to children while also imparting societal values and virtues has become an

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ever-evolving part of western culture. John Newbery published *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* in 1744, which served as one of the first books to form the genre of children's literature. The book's "purported goal is to make Tommy and Polly 'good,' but aims to do so through games rather than lessons" (Fleming 464) in order to amuse and educate children simultaneously. Newbery states in the preface that the book is intended for the instruction and amusement of boys and girls while ensuring behaviour can be monitored with the included objects: a ball and pincushion. Play is a valuable asset in Newbery's book as he considers recreation to be necessary in child development, while also using activity as a means to impart lessons to his readers. The "innocent Games that good Boys and Girls divert themselves with" (Newbery 16-17) raises questions about how the author values play in terms of the moral and educational goals he sets for his readers and their families. Thus, the purpose of play in Newbery's *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* is to help enforce secular morality in the home, impart Lockean didactic reasoning, and prepare children for the adult world.

The secular morality found in *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* represents the transition away from Puritan morality in which children were damned from original sin and could only hope to save their souls through consistent piety and prayer. Using the ball and pincushion as a ledger for good and bad behaviours allows Newbery's morals to be enforced in the home. As stated in "A Letter from *Jack* the Giant-Killer," the character, Jack, promises to reward good

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behaviour with pennies and punish bad behaviours by sending a rod to be used on the child. The accompanying toys allowed for Newbery's "moral education [to be] readily actionable in the home" (Klemann 225) while also serving as "tangible symbols of morality" (226) so that children could recognize what is "good" and what is "bad." Although being "whipt" with the rod may seem harsh, the author is not promising eternal damnation with bad behaviour, unlike the consequences outlined in Puritan ideology. The use of the physical objects creates an "exchange-value" morality that would not have been found in Puritan morality as the objects are used "as visible markers of an individual's goodness" (Klemann 226) in order to allow children to receive rewards or punishments based on their respective behaviours. Newbery attempts to integrate this morality with play in the games found in *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book*, as shown in the game "Chuck-Farthing" (Newbery 24) that is supposedly meant to teach children the importance of observation. Other games have different lessons with varying degrees of religion as "Shuttle-Cock" (32) shows children that there are highs and lows with fortune while "*Flying the Kite*" (25) emphasizes the importance of showing appreciation to God. The use of play within these lessons emphasizes the marketplace of morality Newbery has set up with the included lessons, since the games were designed to manage children's behaviour. This exchange of behaviour for rewards or punishments exemplifies a transition to secular morality as the author sets out to form

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children's morality based on their individual actions as opposed to overcoming the original sin found in Puritan piety.

Influence from John Locke's philosophy can be found in *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book*, as there is a strong focus on sensory experience through games and pedagogical reasoning akin to those philosophies found in Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. Locke has been considered a "precursor to early children's literature" (Fleming 464) as he places "emphasis on sensory experience necessitate[ing] a worldly education" (464) and provides insights into how play is a valuable asset to moral education. Locke discusses the value placed on both the education of the mind and the education of the body as they both "rest on the same principle, namely that education consists in the learning of correct habits by engaging in the requisite actions" (Tuckness 629). Newbery embodies this philosophy in his publication with the inclusion of the ball and pincushion as physical markers of children's good and bad behaviours. Binding the physical objects "with the fictional narrative text strengthens the metonymic ties that connote the narrative's practical function" (Klemann 233), thereby establishing a base for didactic moral reasoning within the publication's games. Fleming argues that "Newbery establishes his book as a "training ground for reasoning" (230) since he is using rationality on the basis of a secular morality as opposed to focusing on Puritan piety. The morals associated with each game in *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* mitigate the idea that

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play exists as a means unto itself since it focuses on a moral epistemology that motivates children to become conscious of all of their actions and behaviours. Since Locke “was convinced that children would learn far more if learning was part of play and was not forced upon them” (Tuckness 632), it is evident that Newbery used these beliefs in the conception of *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book*. The games provide an accessible moral education based on the didactic theories of John Locke in order for children to strengthen their morality and develop rational thought.

The ultimate goal in forming children’s morals and values at a young age is to ensure they become functional and virtuous adults in society. The games in *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* aim to direct children towards this goal as they provide rational and pragmatic lessons that will be employed in the adult world. The use of Lockean pedagogy and epistemology brings “more of the wide world tangibly into the purview of the child he is preparing for integrations into that world” (Klemann 225) by introducing children to commercial society. The rules of the ball and pincushion are straightforward and create an accessible notion of what is to be expected based on the children’s good and bad behaviours. By tracking behaviours in this way it “grant[s] the child access to [Lockean moral] reasoning for the purpose of everyday living” (Klemann 225), making the abstract ideas of virtue far more tangible to children. Pragmatic philosophy underlies Newbery’s games in the publication as the morals for each game are meant to help children learn

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about the responsibilities of their society. For example, "The *great K Play*" (Newbery 42) lists care-free swimming as the game, but the moral cautions the readers to be careful of what they say because "Words once flown/Once utter'd, are no more your own" (42). This moral is a rather mature lesson for young children and does not seem to have much association with the game itself, but Newbery is hoping to use recreation for "productive and educational ends" (Klemann 228). Additionally, there is a lot of emphasis on economic value in these games that seem to prepare children for commercial society. Both "The *great E Play*" (Newbery 32) and "The *great H Play*" (38) list the morals for their games as a warning for children to beware of fortune because it comes and goes. Considering the way Newbery tracks good and bad behaviours with objects as an exchange-value for rewards and punishment, the morals of rising and falling fortune connects to the capitalist market prevalent in 17th century society. Newbery makes it clear in the preface that parents must instil morals in their children as it is by following "those excellent Rules by which whole Societies, States, Kingdoms and Empires are knit together" (9). Thus, the morals associated with play in *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* are instructions for forming adults that will be responsible, functional, and virtuous in order to maintain societal values.

A Little Pretty Pocket-Book presents many different ideas and values as to what is important about play and what makes a child good or bad. With the incorporation of

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Locke's moral reasoning, in addition to physical objects to track good and bad behaviours, Newbery demonstrates how morality could be enforced in the home. There is a clear move away from strictly Puritan and religious views as the lessons in the games focus on making the children more valuable members of society as opposed to trying to save their souls from eternal damnation. In this publication, Newbery "contribute[s] to the juvenile moral instruction because they are absorbed into fiction and interactive play" (Klemann 237) by using recreation as a means to acquiring a proper moral education. Play, however, cannot be considered in and of itself a means to an end as it is the author's hope that through management and nurturing children can be "*Strong, Hardy, Healthy, Virtuous, Wise, and Happy*" (Newbery, Preface). Thus, children's play, as represented in *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book*, serves to provide an accessible moral education, teach didactic reasoning akin to the philosophies of John Locke, and prepare children for adulthood through the formation of societal virtues.

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