



Classics in Short Number 105

Article Author:

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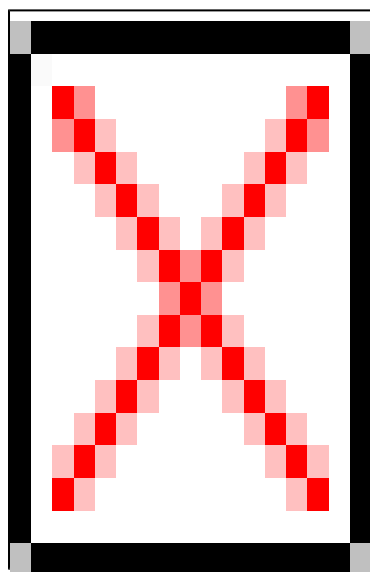
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Article Category:

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A rags to riches story: **Little Goody-Two Shoes**



A rags to riches story, was this the first English classic story for children?

On-line

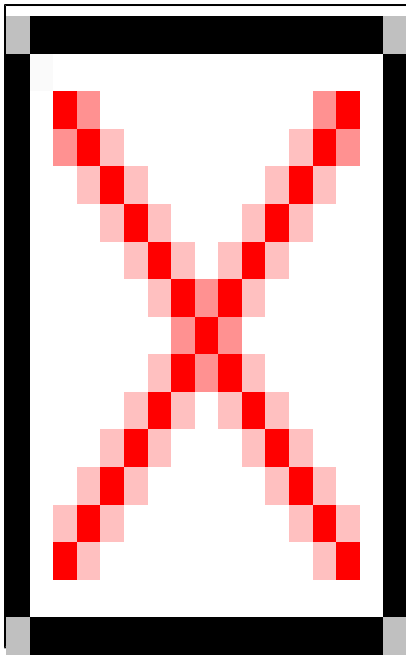
the Oxford dictionary has it that 'a goody-two-shoes' is 'a smugly or obtrusively virtuous person', but in doing so it sadly maligns the name of its great Begetter.

She was Margery,

bereft orphan of Farmer Meanwell and his wife. They had been hounded off their land by the rapacious Sir Timothy Gripe and, destitute, and in 'a Place where Doctor James's Fever Powder was not to be had' had both expired. Margery and her brother Tommy were left to sleep in a barn and to live off what hedge-pickings they could find, and while Tommy was accoutered in a pair of shoes poor Margery had lost one of hers.

Rescue came

through Mr Smith, 'a very worthy Clergyman', who saw to it that Tommy was kitted out to be a sailor, while Margery was measured up for a proper pair of shoes. And thus it was that, with a cry of 'Two Shoes, Mame, two Shoes!' she paraded the village 'and by that Means obtained the name of *Goody Two-Shoes*' or even of *Old Two-Shoes*.



Further reference

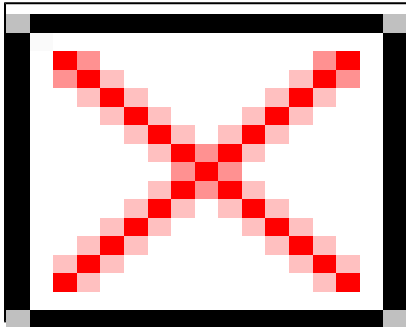
to etymologies will also yield the information that the 'Goody' bit had nothing to do with virtue, smug or otherwise, but was simply the local nickname applied to honoured village goodwives. Nevertheless, our Goody was good-hearted by nature and possessed of a remarkable resilience. For when the odious Gripe (who gets his comeuppance at the end) resumes his persecutions, she takes herself off to another parish, teaches herself to read, and sets herself up as 'a trotting Tutoress'. Armed with what sounds to be a heavy bagful of wooden letters, she tours the neighbourhood and teaches the village children how to read through a play-way scheme of her own invention. (Mr Gove may be sorry to hear that it seems to be closer to look-and-say than synthetic phonics.)

Great Learning

having thus been established as a means of social advancement, Little Goody's story rather fragments itself thereafter until Tommy's return, having made a large fortune 'beyond Sea'. Random ideas, such as a ghost story to show there's no such thing, are briskly exploited, while irrelevancies such as Rules for the Conduct of Life, and a poem by Addison are interjected, giving the impression of a need to fill up pages rather than tell a coherent tale.

But --

first published in 1765 (only one copy of which edition now survives) ? *Little Goody Two-Shoes* has had lasting fame. It can be seen as one of the first attempts to tell children a story of contemporary life, while it is also the most celebrated original product of the London bookseller John Newbery who did more than anyone else to establish children's books as a tradeable form of literature. (Between 1744 and his death in 1767 he published well over fifty of the things, many going into multiple printings.)



Among these,

Goody was a new phenomenon and was at once greeted as such by encouraging almost instant imitation. It also buzzed with a discursive energy that was typical of Newbery's book-making style. Indeed, the compendium in which it has just made a new and welcome reappearance includes two other items from his list which well support that contention: *The Fairing*, from around the same date as *Goody*, a racketty, whirligig account of a visit to a fair, and *The Lilliputian Magazine*, a miscellany originating from 1751, when he attempted the first magazine for children. (The compendium has all the original metalcut illustrations and its value is enhanced by one of the best-ever accounts of the background to the works in question by Professor Matthew Grenby.)

Jumbled up

though Mrs Goody's progress might be, it carries many entertaining evidences of Mr Newbery's own involvement in the editing. There is a hectoring Introduction on social iniquities addressed to 'Children of six Feet high'. Opportunities are taken to plug other Newbery ventures, not least Dr James's Fever Powder, of which he was sole agent, but other children's books such as the titles of those 'usually read by the Scholars of Mrs Two-Shoes' which were sold at his shop in St Paul's Church-Yard. Coverage of her tutorial activities (assisted by a talking raven) make part of the book almost a reading-scheme in itself, while he takes great pleasure in drawing readers' attention to the cuts ('by Michael Angelo!'). 'Pray look at him', he says of a dressed-up Tommy, or 'This is a fine hearse indeed' of what looks to be a very wonky vehicle.

And at the start

he is urgent in addressing his work 'to all young Gentlemen and Ladies who are good, or intend to be good' assuring them that it will benefit those:

'Who from a State of Rags and Care,

And having Shoes but half a Pair,

Their Fortune and their Fame would fix

And gallop in a Coach and Six.

Brian Alderson is founder of the **Children's Books History Society** and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**.

Little Goody Two-Shoes and Other Stories, originally published by John Newbery, Palgrave Macmillan, 280pp, 978-1137274274, £12.99 hbk

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