

The Little Moralists, or the History of Amintor and Florella, the Pretty Little Shepherd and Shepherdess of the Vale of Evesham. London: Elizabeth Newbery, 1786. 4 inches x 2 3/8 inches (102 x 61 mm), 96 pages, 13 woodcuts.

This work, the dedication of which is signed “R.J.” is attributed to Richard Johnson, an author closely associated with the publications of the Newberys. Johnson is often termed a “hack-writer” because he would write, abridge, or even “borrow” anything that his publishers would pay for. Johnson made a decent living from scattered commissions, most of them from John Newbery’s successors. Johnson’s reliance on pseudonyms—such as “Revd. W. D. Cooper,” “Master Michael Angelo,” and “Master Tommy Littleton”—adds to the challenge of positively identifying Johnson’s work.

This tale is set on the river Avon in Evesham. It is the home of Amintor and Florella, the children of poor shepherds. The parents cannot afford to send Amintor and Florella to school but teach them to read by means of the “Royal Primer” (published by John Newbery in 1755). The local parson, who knows Amintor and Florella to be good children (“little moralists”), sees them reading *The Royal Primer* and discovers that they own only one book. He lends them a story book and asks them to read him a story the following day. Thus begins a series of stories within this story. In the intervals between these stories, Amintor and Florella befriend Squire Simpson and his family. After repeated good deeds by the young pair, the squire gives their parents the lease of a good farm, allowing the family to become prosperous. As adults, Amintor and Florella build a school for young shepherds and shepherdesses on the spot where they once took their lessons from the parson. The tale may be summed up by the following moral: “riches are a blessing or an evil only as you apply them[.] If you be born to a fortune, do what good you can; if you be poor, be industrious and contented.”

The Little Moralists was published by Elizabeth Newbery, a successor to John Newbery (1713–1767), the Englishman considered by some to be the inventor of children’s literature and by others to have been the first to recognize its commercial potential. Eventually John Newbery’s publications became the property of Elizabeth, and numerous

other publishers came to specialize in children's literature. The American Library Association's annual Newbery Medal commemorates John Newbery's contributions to the genre.

This book is from the Bodleian Library's Douce Collection, named for Francis Douce (1757–1834), a British antiquary and the Keeper of Manuscripts at the British Museum from 1807 to 1811. His bequest of more than 19,000 volumes contained printed books from various periods, including nearly 500 incunables, as well as roughly 425 manuscripts. Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century children's books numbered among Douce's wide range of collecting specialties. This copy of *The Little Moralists* is in a contemporary binding of boards covered with Dutch floral paper. The title page bears the stamp "EX DONO FR. DOUCE | BIBL. BODL." and is signed "M H Haskoll | 1799." Leaf A1 is inscribed "Emily Haskoll | 1819".

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