

REBECCA HARDING DAVIS AND CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Robin Cadwallader

St. Francis University

One of Rebecca Harding Davis's earliest recollections (detailed in *Bits of Gossip*) is of her father telling his children the fantastic story of Monsieur Jean Crapeaud, an old, twelve-inch high French nobleman who lived in "a narrow high closet cut into the side of the dining-room chimney" (28). Davis later would channel this type of storytelling to create educational and entertaining narratives for her own children and the young readers of respected children's periodicals such as *Saint Nicholas*, *Our Young Folks*, *Youth's Companion*, and *Riverside Magazine*. Davis's children's stories cover a broad range of genres, including histories, biographies, fables, and adventure tales; many of her stories include a moral, not unlike other publications of the time.

In an 1845 review of a new periodical for children, Margaret Fuller declares, "There is no branch of literature that better deserves cultivation, and none that so little obtains it from worthy hands as this of Children's books. It requires a peculiar development of the genius and sympathies, rare among the men of factitious life, who are not men enough to revive, with force and beauty, the thoughts and scenes of childhood" (311). Rather than a diet of overly sweet "sugar-plums," she argues, children need "a larger proportion of the facts of natural or human history" (312, 314). Davis gives young readers just what Fuller called for in children's literature. For example, in the eighteen stories she published in *St. Nicholas* between November 1873 and July 1910, just months before her death, six, or one third, are history lessons: "About the Painter of Little Penelope," "The Strawberry Girl," and "Gilbert Stuart" are brief glimpses into the lives and motivations of two artists; "The Every-Day Franklin" is a tribute to the Pennsylvania statesman; "Ferrucci and His Foes" tells the story of a young man's "bravery and freedom" in standing up to the Medici (683); and "Two Brave Boys" compares the acts of two young men who went above and beyond to save the lives of others.

In addition to presenting history in an understandable form for children, Davis creates works of pure entertainment, drawing on the art of storytelling she experienced as a child. The connection to her own childhood can be found early in *Bits of Gossip*, where she reflects on the “mysteries” of the house in which she grew up and declares of her father’s storytelling, “We could not be taken in by it” (28). This statement is a good indicator of Davis’s method of storytelling for children. First, she draws readers in with the promise of a mystery; then, she injects a dose of reality, announcing that some things are just too fantastic for anyone to believe. Throughout, she gently reminds readers that what they are reading is a story; she doesn’t risk losing them to the fantasy she is creating, for she knows that children may believe in fairy tales, but there are limits to the imagination. Indeed, Davis understood the importance of *telling* a good story and what it meant to be a storyteller, and her children’s stories reflect this in content, imagery, and language.

Works Cited

Davis, Rebecca Harding. *Bits of Gossip*. 1904. Rpt. in *Rebecca Harding Davis: Writing Cultural Autobiography*. Ed. Janice M. Lasseter and Sharon M. Harris. Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2001. 21-130.

Fuller, Margaret. [“Children’s Books.”] Review of *The Child’s Friend*, ed. Eliza L. Follen. *New York Tribune* 5 Feb. 1845: 1. Rpt. in *Women in the Nineteenth Century and Kindred Papers Relating to the Sphere, Condition, and Duties of Woman*. By Margaret Fuller Ossoli. Ed. Arthur B. Fuller. Boston: Brown, Taggard, and Chase, 1855. 311-14.