

Boys, Girls, and Trains: Ambiguous Gender Roles in E.
Nesbit's *The Railway Children*

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One simply needs to notice that E. Nesbit published with the initial "E" instead of using her name, Edith, thus shielding her identity as a woman from her readers, to realize that Nesbit had a profound understanding of her prescribed place in Victorian England and that she very consciously operated outside of that realm. Discussions of Nesbit often begin with the fact that she was a tomboy as a child and smoked cigarettes and wore knickers as an adult; she was not the idealized tender, Victorian woman. Amelia Rutledge explains that in her own life "Nesbit in no way conformed to the image of 'angel in the house'" (226). This, of course, is not to say that authors' lives are always reflected in their writing, but to recognize that Nesbit's own confrontation with her prescribed role as woman in Victorian society may be reflected in her child characters in *The Railway Children*.

The child characters of classic Victorian children's literature usually fall into one of two roles: ones who need an adult's watchful eye because of their inherent badness or innocent ones, who played the role of redeemer for the adult characters. Bobbie, Peter, and Phyllis of *The Railway Children* are rescuers like their predecessors in children's literature, but their self sufficiency, ingenuity, and

independence remove them from the previous model of redeemer. They appear to understand their place and limitations as children and use this awareness to ask for aid when the adults in their lives will not. Nesbit's novel moves children beyond the designations, creating layered, complex humans, not just boys and girls. Boundaries between cultural notions of gender dissolve through images of femininity, masculinity, boys, and girls in Nesbit's novel. And this dissolution of gender emerges predominantly through the character Bobbie and her relationship with the other characters and the train that the children come to love and admire.

Bobbie appears to be a young girl with a profound understanding of her role as a girl and its limitations. Although, at one point in the novel, she reprimands herself for being a "girl," and explicitly states, "I wish I was a boy," she never assumes the role of the patriarchs; Bobbie finds a way to work within the hierarchy by working in both male and female roles (Nesbit 219). This young female character's ability to work within the system reflects Nesbit's own ingenuity in writing *The Railway Children*, as the novel is an exercise of questioning strict notions of gender roles while staying within the standards of children's literature in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods.

The popular role of juvenile literature in the Victorian/ Edwardian period was to set standards of male and female behavior for children. Kimberly Reynolds explains that "good children's books [were] aids to correct socialization;" the books needed to be "clearly instructive, elevating, and sexually appropriate" (32). Because of this need to properly shape young minds, children's literature was separated into books for boys and books for girls.

Reading these segregated texts was an important element of establishing gender roles for the children (94). The boys' books were often great adventure stories of exploring wild lands and were filled with men who conquer the land and villains to become heroes, or the books presented stories of young boys who go off to school and bond with other males. These books rarely had female characters, and if a female present, she was a weak mother, who often died, allowing the young boy to leave and live amongst men (Reynolds 36).

Since young girls were thought to be "highly suggestible, it was socially imperative that their innocence be preserved," so their books were often centered within the home (Reynolds 93). As in many of the domestic novels for adults, the image of the "angel in house" was prevalent in young girls' fiction; the angel was often the mother, and the young girls learned to model themselves after her; they become "little mothers." Boys learned to be great fighters and left for worldly adventures and discoveries, while girls stayed in the home and learned to be good mothers and caretakers.

Near the turn of the century, a demand for more "exciting books for girls" emerged, and the genres of the adventure story and the domestic tale were married to create the domestic adventure story. Although this new wave in children's literature promised more adventure for the young female characters, many young females were still stuck in the home; Reynolds explains, "the domestic adventures studiously ignore[d] changes and challenges to established notions of femininity and the role of women" (94). But, Nesbit's body of work in children's literature, which fit firmly within the framework of the domestic adventure, transformed children's literature by bringing

groups of children to the story and, with this grouping of boys with girls, allowed girls to operate in the same realm as boys. By allowing male and female children to freely interact, Nesbit opened the door for the exploration of gender roles on a different level.

While the standard for the Victorian children's story was to erase any complexity from the child characters, Nesbit brought complex, layered notions of child to the reader by challenging earlier models; Nesbit's children are mischievous and good in one. As Moss points out, she freed her child characters from the constraints of classic children's literature (231). Through this new representation of young characters, Nesbit brought young readers the Bastables, and she "imbu[ed] her Bastable children [both boys and girls] with a spirited naughtiness" (Moss 229). With this new "spirit" and awareness of the adult world, Nesbit's child characters were a departure from the classic tale, and their stories were then the models of the domestic adventure and fantasy. *The Railway Children* is not filled with the fantasy adventures in many of Nesbit's other tales, but it most certainly enters the realm of adventure as the children save members of their community.

In *The Railway Children*, Nesbit uses the model of the domestic adventure, but within that schema inverts the traditional notions of male and female roles; the children's novel was a perfect format to explore ideas that were considered "dissident" at the time (Foster and Simons 129). Bobbie, Peter and Phyllis's mother is, at times, the "classic idol of nineteenth century domesticity," one of the "angelic ladies, [who] find themselves temporarily deprived of husbands and incomes" (Reynolds 95). By creating an adult female who falls into the model of the traditional tale, Nesbit keeps her readers in a realm which appears to fulfill

classic stories. The role of the mother allows the reader to stay in schema of late Victorian/ Edwardian novel, while Nesbit simultaneously subverts the societal ideals of male and female through her child characters.

The novel also adopts the common element in domestic adventure story of an absent parent, usually the father, and a group of children who go on various escapades. The absence of the male figure, while disrupting the classic family structure, allows the children to take more responsibility when the head of the house is gone, but in order to have balance within the family, the return of the dominant male is very necessary. Nesbit appeared to explore this theme in her adult fiction as well. In these stories, despite independence, the female's return to a male is a predominant feature at the end her stories. Rutledge points out that Nesbit gives her female characters "new woman elements, but then subverts them by reversion to the marriage plot at the end" (224, 227). The return of the father at the end of *The Railway Children* may indicate that the circle is complete, and Bobbie will return to Roberta. But, the genre of children's literature allowed Nesbit to confront the notions of gender so deeply embedded in her culture; she was able to present a seemingly innocent tale and counter those stereotypes (Reynolds 228). Although the patriarchal figure in the family returns at the end of the novel, Nesbit gives the reader no indication that Bobbie will fully return to Roberta. The ending simply exists because it was "a necessary feature" if an author wanted to publish children's literature (Reynolds 39). The return of the father, like the mother, sick and absent, keeps the schema of the literature of the period.

**Nesbit's young female character, Bobbie, is a perfect vehicle to explore the ambiguous nature of gender.

The young girl is both Roberta and Bobbie and her younger sister is Phil, creating questionable gender identities for both girls. The brother Peter keeps his name, but often finds himself in the role of the traditional female character of Victorian children's books. Although Peter, the only male figure left in the home, declares, "I'm the head man of the family when Father's away," he constantly fails in his attempts to fulfill the role as the strong leader; the role belongs to his sister, Bobbie, who is both the empowered female sibling and the sensitive nurturer of the family; she is both father and mother. Peter's failings "to demonstrate real strength is in marked contrast to Bobbie's resistance and courage" (Foster and Simons 137). With Peter incapable of fulfilling the male role, Bobbie's position of leader is emphasized further. Importantly, she does not ever give up her feminine self to lead the family; she moves in between male and female, child and adult.

In confronting gender roles, Nesbit allows Bobbie to take on an adult role, moving her out of the realm of "genderless child." Bobbie knows how to work the system as one without agency in the role of female and child. She uses adults as tools to rescue other adults from problems created by an adult world: her father's imprisonment, their own poverty, and the separation of the Russian writer from his family. She rebels against adult authority, thus taking adult responsibility herself; she becomes the mother figure for her siblings as well as her mother. Laura Briggs writes that "Bobbie ... is a child at the crossroads. As a 'little mother' to the others, she takes on herself adult responsibilities" (27). She works within and around the societal constraints of female and child to accomplish what is needed as the children are faced with new obstacles. For example, she boldly asks a stranger to help when the

mother is ill and “could not feel that she had done wrong. She knew Mother would perhaps think differently. But Bobbie felt that for once, she was the one who was right” (Nesbit 70). By giving Bobbie the role of a mother, Nesbit at once creates the “virginal mother” and also opens the door for an adult female to assert herself within the patriarchal system.

Throughout the Victorian period mothers were considered to be sexual and virginal; the notion of motherhood was separated from the notion of “becoming a mother” (Holmes and Nelson 3). The role of “virginal mother” gives Bobbie the freedom, since she is not biologically a mother herself and not yet tainted by sex, to explore gender roles, sexuality, and the power connected to both. As a young girl on the edge of womanhood, Bobbie learns to operate within the male dominated order using her freedom as a child. She crosses from child to adult and, at the same time, between female and male identities; she is a young woman who desires to move beyond the angel in the house. By using a pubescent girl, Nesbit challenges this domestic ideal; Bobbie is on the edge of womanhood and represents budding sexuality, so she balances out the fragile mother. In her, Nesbit takes advantage of what Foster and Simons calls the “anarchic potential of childhood;” she is “both androgynous child and burgeoning adult woman” (Foster and Simons 129,140). Bobbie straddles the worlds of Roberta, the young girl on the verge of relinquishing her position as a child, where she has more freedom than an adult woman and the world of Bobbie, where she possesses the power of the male figure and is able to guide herself and her family.

The transgressive nature of Bobbie’s movement across gender lines emerges as the children’s acute

awareness of the gender roles they are to fulfill becomes evident in their references to books. Of course, only Peter insists they adhere to these models. Peter attempts to be the late nineteenth century boy, such as Jim Hawkins in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*; he tries to assert himself as the aggressive male. He fights to be the brave one, the smart one, the caretaker of the mother, and the strongest one. But, in context of the literature he knows, he is stuck in what Claudia Nelson calls the asexual male of the mid-Victorian period, who must learn through humiliation and powerlessness (29). Peter’s humiliation and powerlessness is evident in such scenes when he breaks his engine, and the narrator tells the reader that “[t]he others said he cried over it, but of course boys of ten do not cry” (Nesbit 3). And when Peter recalls an earlier confrontation, his “sisters were kind enough not to remind him how had *not* fought the boys” (142). Early in the text, the reader knows how boys should behave and how this behavior contrast with Peter’s actions. In the latter scene, the emphasis on the word “not” lets the reader know that Peter is not the great fighter he desires to be, and his sisters merely humor him, perhaps understanding silence is necessary for his fragile ego. Although a young man, Peter is the character who possesses the tenderness and sensitivity attributed to females.

Late in the text when the children are walking through a dark tunnel, “Peter caught hold of Bobbie’s arm, ‘in case she should be frightened,’ he explained afterwards” (210). He feels powerless and turns to his sister, who supports him throughout their adventures. As Bobbie takes control in almost every adventure, Peter attempts to reassert himself with language to counter his actions as if words will erase his behavior. One such moment is when Bobbie and

Phyllis lure him into playing doctor only to tie him up and leave him, he exclaims, "It wasn't even your own idea. You got it out of Stalky!" (234). He acknowledges that Bobbie learned the trick from a boys' school story; she receives instruction from a male text and identifies with it, freely taking the boys behavior as her own. In his assertion, Peter also attempts to undermine Bobbie's ingenuity by attributing it to merely aping male behavior, she read about in boys' story and "acts like a boy" instead of conforming to the role of girl. She turns away from the authority of children's books that work to define her nature.

Peter knows from his readings not only his place, but Bobbie's as well. Reynolds writes about the domestic children's novel "that in juvenile books concerned with family there is a succession of invalid women who are held up as the models of feminine ideal" (95). With a crushed ego, Peter expresses a desire for this type of female as he continues to fight on of Bobbie's victories and displays an acute awareness of how girls should behave in stories. He states, "If it had been you, then you'd be lying on the sofa looking like a suffering angel" (Nesbit 188). Peter attempts to designate his victorious sister to the realm of the proper woman. Ironically, "lying on the sofa" is where he is when he makes the statement, and his attempt is unsuccessful as they all are.

Just as the commonly known children's literature of the time reveals the inability to adhere to gender roles, the use of gender specific devices create ambiguity and mark the failure of designated roles in the lives of the children. In the garden scene, Nesbit highlights gender ambiguity in Peter's struggle for male dominance by using a rake as a symbol of masculine identity; it is a tool and a weapon. While Bobbie is working to clear out the rose bushes she

killed, Peter plays in the dirt "making a model for a railway tunnel, cutting, embankment, canal, aqueduct, bridges, and all" (Nesbit 182). He builds a new civilized space in the once untamed land, and he takes Bobbie's tool, the rake, for reworking the land in the process. The children battle for control the object which is an extension of power; its use is to transform the land, and this notion reflects back to the imperial adventures of boys' books. Bobbie lets go of the rake which penetrates Peter, reducing him to a weakened state; he becomes feminized once again. Her choice to let go of the weapon reveals the complicated role of woman; she may chose to see equality as being a man or working within the power structure to find her own place. And in relinquishing control of the weapon, Bobbie gains the firm ground that Peter loses. She gives him the means of controlling the land, chooses not to play in the struggle of power, and ultimately comes out on top, while Peter is incapacitated and can no longer stand on his own. The battle displays the failure of overtly masculine aggression; the one who wins possession of the weapon is then damaged by the very weapon he desires.

The failure of the honored male aggression of the boy's books is further underscored in the children's adventure on the barge and the burning boat. The children return to the Canal Bridge where Peter failed in his role as the aggressive male when approached by other boys: he did not fight them, but escaped their aggression. This time, Peter confronts the Bargee and insists that the children have as much right to be on the barge as anyone; the narrator notes "that [he] was always proud when he remembered that" (142). This is, seemingly, one moment when Peter is able to take the role of man he desperately desires to play, but as Peter attempts to use his reason and display bravery

by confronting another man, the Bargee twists Peter's ear and forces him on the ground. Peter is only freed when Bobbie charges down the hill and into the Bargee; she saves Peter again. And when accused of shoving the Bargee, she states, "I'm not shoving anybody. At least not on purpose" (142). Like the garden scene, she does not conscientiously take the role of aggressor to resolve the situation and is able to reason with the Bargee when Peter's confrontation fails.

The adventure and Bobbie's role as "male leader" continue when the children spot a burning boat and Bobbie fights with Peter as they race to the flames; "Bobbie was first ... and it was Peter who slipped and fell" (148). The young boy again proves to be the less capable adventurer as he slides into the water and his little sister Phyllis saves him. Although Bobbie makes it to the boat first, Peter "flung her aside very roughly indeed" (148). He resorts to violence again; regardless of his line of failures when trying to fulfill the role of the appropriate late Victorian boy, he still turns to violence to achieve his goals. While Peter triumphs in this adventure by saving the baby, he, unwittingly, by overcoming Bobbie, is once again in the female role. When out of danger, Peter stands, holding the baby, evoking the maternal image.

The rake, used to tame the land, and the baby, marking maternity, are clever devices that reveal the androgynous nature of the children. Another overtly gender specific device in the novel is the petticoat. Nesbit skillfully brings the petticoat into the text and illustrate the conflicting nature of sexual identity. Noel Steatfeid explains, "Nesbit knew perfectly well that at the date when she wrote the book the girls not only did not wear petticoats but had never seen one" (21). The petticoat is not only a female garment, but the notion of petticoat is derogatory for

female power over males; young boys who are controlled by or are surrounded by "female rule" are said to be under the petticoat; this is certainly where Peter must operate. This notion reveals the complexity of the "petticoat scenes." Bobbie states, "Oh, what useful things flannel petticoats are! ...the man who invented them ought to have a statue directed to him" (Nesbit 218). She assumes a man created the garment. One reading is Bobbie accepts the confines of her feminine dress and wants to honor the patriarchy for her position. But given the situations, the petticoat scenes reveal the boundaries put upon the young woman, and that she is able to work within those boundaries.

In both scenes, Bobbie removes her petticoat to aid others, the passengers on the train and the young man in the tunnel. With the understanding of the negative connotations towards female power, she confronts the inflammatory connections as she destroys the red petticoat and gives the white petticoat to the young man. She frees herself of the negativity connected to the garment. As the train heads toward potential disaster, Bobbie tells Peter, "Oh yes tear them [the petticoats] into little bits" (112). She is at once directing Peter to destroy the confining garment and the misunderstanding of female struggle for empowerment. But, Peter's attempt to rip the petticoats is futile. As a young man, he lacks the power to destroy, manipulate, or alter femininity. Bobbie easily rips the petticoats, and the fact they are red speaks to her ability to dissect and destroy the notions connected to her coming womanhood. The narrator tells the reader, "She took the red flannel petticoat from him and tore it an inch off the band" (112). She removes the material from the band which keeps it tightly around her body. The red petticoat as the girls' female sexuality is the key element in saving the train;

"[t]he very signs of their femininity ... become the instruments of their power and influence" (Foster and Simons 141). The petticoat image is equally as complex in the tunnel scene when Bobbie removes it to comfort the young man.

The second petticoat is white; Bobbie is wrapped in feminine purity. She is able to comfort the young man in the dark tunnel with her feminine nature; she is tender and maternal. If one reads the young man as a potential mate for Bobbie, she is handing him her virginity. But, turning back to the notion of petticoat as symbol of female power over males, she lets the young man know he is safe under her protection. He is indebted to her and needs her for his own well being; she is mother, lover, and authority figure.

The tunnel scene also reveals Bobbie's awareness of her vacillation between male and female identities. As Bobbie moves through the dark tunnel with Peter and Phyllis to find the young man, her dress is "... rip[ped] about half a yard of gathers but no one noticed at the time;" her femininity is altered as she penetrates the tunnel. And when the children find the boy, Bobbie insists on remaining alone although Peter believes that "mother would disapprove" (Nesbit 216). Left alone, Bobbie becomes nervous and echoes young Alice in *Alice in Wonderland* when she "splits" into two beings and harshly reprimands herself for being a "silly little girl." The narrator tells the reader that "it was only when she was very angry with herself that she allowed Roberta to use that expression to Bobbie" (Nesbit 217). Unlike Alice's split into abusive mother and child, Bobbie splits into adult/child and female/male; the female or woman reprimands the androgynous child or the male for acting like a girl.

After acknowledging her own feminine weakness of fear, she expresses an understanding that a boy should have more strength: she tells the young man, "yes, I wish I was a boy" (219). While this may be a moment of not only renouncing her female identity, but embracing the idea of male, she quickly reverses her comment when she then tells the boy, "I meant don't you wish *you* were a boy, but of course you are without wishing" (219). Bobbie rescues the young man, who is injured and powerless; their roles are reversed. She acknowledges this reversal when she says, "don't you wish *you* were a boy." Nesbit's emphasis of "you" indicates Bobbie is aware of this change of gender roles; the young man is the "invalid" angel comforted by a white petticoat, and she is "brave as boy" and rescues the young man. On the other hand, the boy is "without wishing;" as a male, he is in the dominant position by nature of their society. The juxtaposition of the two remarks complicates the notions of boy and girl.

The dissolution of gender boundaries moves beyond that of the male and female characters; the train, something all three children come to love, is also connected notions of both male and female roles. The children choose the railway as their "home away from home" in the physical absence of their father and the emotional absence of their mother; in the children's minds, it is their connection to the father and, at the same time, the distant, sick mother. When Peter breaks the model engine, which is a gift from his father, the image of the broken engine foreshadows Peter's inability to successfully take the father's role in his absence. In this scene, Nesbit introduces the gender ambiguity connected to the train early in the story. The father indicates that girls can fix engines and states, "[g]irls are as clever as boys;" Peter is confused by a girl's ability to work within a boy's

realm (6). Later the reader sees that Bobbie is the one who takes the role as caretaker and is the vehicle for the rescue of the father later; she is the one who is able to repair the engine and the men in the family. The railway carries the image of masculinity; all of the workers at the station are men, and the railway is built and ran by men; it illustrates male power, and the train may be seen as taking the role of the absent father

The train as female is most evident in the characters' references to it: Perks calls the train "she," and for Phyllis, the train is a means of transferring tenderness, a quality attributed to females: she comments, "we could stop it and ask it to take our love to father" (43). The powerful force is handed to the feminine. Bobbie's interaction with the train, much like her interaction with Peter, reveals the androgynous nature the object that essentially takes place of their parents and home. When Bobbie searches for help in repairing Peter's engine, she stands next to the train and feels "very small, indeed, and somewhat soft" (76). She is at once faced with the masculine presence that makes her feel "soft" and with a powerful female presence, representing the power of her gender. Despite the intimidating presence of the engine, Bobbie hops on the train, and at this moment in the novel, the classic cultural designations of female as emotional and male as rational emerge and merge to further push the boundaries of gender definition. Although she shows the weaker feminine side when she burst into tears, Bobbie uses her ability of reason to convince the engineer to help her fix Peter's engine, which is a symbol of his broken manhood. The female train image emerges again later in the story as Bobbie, like the train, penetrates into the dark tunnel to save the young man; she moves into the adult world and the male world (216-217). The train is both a

male and female symbol; it is androgynous and it is this strong androgynous symbol that carries the Russian writer, the father, and the older gentleman, all of whom bring comfort to the mother figure. One may certainly see that only through this condensed image of gender is comfort brought to the family.

Presenting a middle class, London family with loving parents and three young, innocent children, the novel creates a very comfortable, safe realm for young readers. In fact, the skewing of gender identities in the children and the train are not immediately obvious in the text; perhaps, only the names of the female characters are an obvious confrontation of explicit gender roles. Bobbie and Peter and their interactions with one another slowly reveal there is something wrong with the classic image readers may have wished to mimic. By rejecting the notions of gender in children's literature, Bobbie learns to operate freely in the adult world, while Peter's failures illustrate the futility of separating the sexes into extremes; the harder one fights to be what he is told to be, the greater the challenge to fulfill that role. Working within the schema and against the tradition of the Victorian children's story, Nesbit creates many fun and challenging adventures and educates her young readers not how to be a child or adult, male or female, but human.

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