

# Boys Should Be Boys and Girls Should Be Wives: The Construction of a Gendered Identity in the *Boy's Own Paper* and *Girl's Own Paper*

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This paper will explore the role played by the *Boy's Own Paper* (*BOP*) and *Girl's Own Paper* (*GOP*) in shaping and defining an explicitly gendered identity for its readers. It takes into account the papers during the First World War and the mid-1950s, and considers the continuities and changes over time, as well as the difficulties in evaluating the significance of one influence among many in shaping identity.

The *Boy's Own Paper* and *Girl's Own Paper* were launched in 1879 and 1880 respectively. Both papers enjoyed enduring success, with the *BOP* closing its doors in 1967, while the *GOP* after several changes of name, ceased publication in 1956. The papers were published by the Religious Tract Society (RTS), an evangelical Protestant Christian missionary organisation founded in 1799 to disseminate cheap religious tracts 'to adults in Britain and overseas'.<sup>1</sup> In the mid-nineteenth century the Society became concerned that sensationalist literature targeted specifically at a young audience was inciting young boys to commit crime.<sup>2</sup> They identified a need for an alternative source of wholesome literature to counteract the so-called "penny dreadfuls", but recognised that an overtly religious publication would not be able to seduce boys away from the thrills of titles like *The Dance of Death; or, The Hangman's Plot: A Tale of London and Paris*.<sup>3</sup> They, therefore, attempted to persuade a commercial publisher to produce such a magazine. Having failed to do so, however, they took up the challenge themselves.<sup>4</sup>

Unexpectedly the *BOP* was a commercial success, and the Society rapidly moved to create a sister paper, the *GOP*, in 1880; thus neatly providing for girls whilst at the same time protecting the *BOP* as an exclusively male gendered space.<sup>5</sup> As Wendy Forrester notes, the *GOP* was "by no means a B.O.P. with the sexes hanged".<sup>6</sup> The two magazines differed vastly from each other, both in tone and content. Although, inevitably given the length of the run of the papers, there was change in the content as the years went by, the papers remained explicitly gendered and created a vision of separate spheres for adolescent boys and girls. The *BOP* was full of tales of derring-do and encouraged boys both literally and figuratively to expand their horizons by taking up healthy outdoor pursuits, undertaking scientific experiments, and thinking about life and adventure in the further reaches of the Empire. The *GOP* meanwhile was far more concerned with the containment of its readers.<sup>7</sup> Playing the role of "counsellor" and "instructor", it sought to combine spirituality with domestic advice and to rehearse girls and

young women for future roles as wives and mothers.<sup>8</sup> The RTS clearly differentiated between the papers in their annual reports. They presented the *BOP* as bright and attractive and stressed the sporting and hobbies aspects of the magazine. Yet they defined the *GOP* in terms of its spiritual worth, as "one of the most valuable and far-reaching tracts published by our Society", offering "spiritual help and comfort" to its readers.<sup>9</sup>

There has been some exploration in the existing historiography of the role of the papers in influencing gender roles. Mitchell and Doughty have explored the way in which the *GOP* helped to shape the new girl culture in the late nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Joseph Bristow has argued that the narrative put forward within magazines like the *BOP* influenced how men learned to be men.<sup>11</sup>

From the very outset, the gendered nature of the papers was made explicit, and the original mastheads for the papers clearly signalled this. The *BOP* masthead was adventurous and bold with clear striking font. It gave an active vision of boyhood, referencing cricket, football, hobbies and animals against a backdrop of unkempt nature, a hedgerow. The *GOP* masthead was far more passive with the font fading into the background on a banner held by a statue entitled "the spirit of truth and love", whose sightless eyes alarmed some readers. Despite a redesign in 1893, the passive imagery remained. The title of the paper was partially obscured by two women in classical robes and the ordered wreaths of foliage behind them were in stark contrast to the wild untamed nature of the *BOP* masthead.<sup>12</sup>

In his 1939 essay on "Boys' Weeklies", George Orwell gave a damning critique of the juvenile boys' papers of the day, arguing they were tools of elites designed to perpetuate conservative values and give an impression of status quo and stability.<sup>13</sup> Such papers, he argued, presented a static world where "The year is 1910 – or 1940, but it is all the same".<sup>14</sup> Analysis of the *GOP* and *BOP* in the 1910s and mid-1950s suggests that whilst there were some areas of change, there was indeed a great deal of stasis in the way in which the papers presented gender roles.

## The Magazines during the First World War

In the 1910s the papers displayed distinct gendered differences on almost every issue. During the First World War

1. Dennis Butts and Pat Garrett, eds., *From the Dairyman's Daughter to Worrals of the Waaf: The Religious Tract Society*, Lutterworth Press and Children's Literature (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2006), 7, 13.

2. Jack Cox, *Take a Cold Tub, Sir!: The Story of the Boy's Own Paper* (Guildford: Lutterworth, 1982), 18.

3. *The Dance of Death* was an Edward J Brett publication which ran from 1865-66. Butts and Garrett, *Dairyman's Daughter*, 133.

4. Butts and Garrett, *Dairyman's Daughter*, 22.

5. Butts and Garrett, *Dairyman's Daughter*, 162.

6. Wendy Forrester, *Great-Grandmama's Weekly: A Celebration of the Girl's Own Paper 1880 - 1901* (Guildford and London: Lutterworth Press, 1980), 13.

7. Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig, *You're a Brick, Angela!: A New Look at Girls' Fiction from 1839 to 1975* (London: Gollancz, 1976), 74.

8. Terri (Ed) Doughty, *Selections from the Girl's Own Paper, 1880-1907* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2004), 7.

9. The Religious Tract Society, "Annual Report of the Religious Tract Society 1922." (Religious Tract Society, 1922).

10. Sally Mitchell, *The New Girl: Girls' Culture in England, 1880-1915* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 3.

Doughty, *Selections from the Girl's Own Paper, 1880-1907*, 7.

11. Joseph Bristow, "Reading for the Empire," in *Empire Boys: Adventures in a Man's World* (London;

[New York, N.Y.]: Unwin Hyman, 1991), 48.

12. Forrester, *Great-Grandmama's Weekly: A Celebration of the Girl's Own Paper 1880 - 1901*, 17.

13. George Orwell, Sonia Orwell, and Ian Angus, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell 1, an Age Like This, 1920-1940* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968), 513, 518.

14. Orwell, Orwell and Angus, *Collected Essays*, 518.

the *GOP* encouraged readers to exercise intelligent thrift, to make do and mend, and to budget sensibly to support their families in times of economic difficulty.<sup>15</sup> Distinctions were made, however, between different groups of girls and women. Married women with dependent children were seen as duty-bound to remain at home, but single girls and women, and those whose children had left home were encouraged to cast aside their fashionable clothing and help out in areas where the loss of the male workforce was being felt, such as factories and agriculture.<sup>16</sup> *BOP*, meanwhile, encouraged all its readers to play their part in the war effort, and issues from 1918 and 1919 illustrate how the war was both glorified and normalised by its pervading presence throughout the paper, with war themes included in poetry, editorials and fiction, and a series of illustrations of “aircraft of the allies” was interspersed throughout the text of the papers.<sup>17</sup>

Boys were encouraged to consider their future responsibilities as men and defenders of the empire, and “grit”, self-reliance and honour were celebrated.<sup>18</sup> Idleness and inactivity were censured as bringing “ridicule and shame”.<sup>19</sup> Women were almost entirely absent from the pages of the *BOP* in this period, and marriage was not explored. For the readers of the *GOP*, however, marriage was an ever present reality and was often the fictional reward for female characters that performed within expected gender roles. The “untaught, unlearned femininity” of one character was contrasted with the more cerebral ambitions of her sister, and it was the former who won the male protagonist’s heart.<sup>20</sup> Whilst feminist views were acknowledged they were also deftly managed and contained. The lure of competing in the male world was downplayed, as it was stressed that men’s working lives were as stultifying as female domesticity.<sup>21</sup> There was, however, some ambiguity over feminine roles as women were also represented as brave, stoic and resourceful.<sup>22</sup>

As the themes of the original masthead suggest, sport saturated the pages of the *BOP*, appearing in fiction, editorials and correspondence, and was deployed as a metaphor for patriotic duty in stirring poetry.<sup>23</sup> Hobbies such as studying nature were noticeably oriented towards activity rather than contemplation, and the importance of getting outdoors was stressed.<sup>24</sup> Readers of *GOP*, meanwhile were directed towards more internal and domestic interests such as gardening, cookery, embroidery and dressmaking.<sup>25</sup> There was a strong emphasis for female readers on utility and service, with articles on household chores and efficiency.<sup>26</sup>

During this period religion was treated very differently across the two papers. In the *BOP* duty and patriotism took the place of religious fervour. A “talk to the boys” spoke of each person playing their role and being “content to do the thing well which we are set to do”.<sup>27</sup> Where religion was mentioned

15. “Intelligent Economy,” *The Girl’s Own Annual* 1915/1916, 16–17.  
 16. Jessie Jeanes, “The Woman with the Hoe,” *The Girl’s Own Annual* 1915/1916, 34–35.  
 Mary Frances Billington, “Women and Munition Work,” *The Girl’s Own Annual* 1915/1916, 413–6.  
 17. “The Boy’s Own Annual,” (London: Religious Tract Society, 1918/1919), 15, 19, 20–21.  
 18. “The Boy’s Own Annual,” 15.  
 19. John Lea, “Gilded Fancies, or the Rhyme of Idledozer,” *The Boy’s Own Annual* 1918/1919, 60.  
 20. Norvell Harrison, “The Woman’s Ultimate Expression,” *The Girl’s Own Annual* 1915/1916, 193–198.  
 21. “The Girl’s Own Annual,” (London: Religious Tract Society, 1915/1916), 18.  
 22. “The Girl’s Own Annual,” 176, 441, 478.  
 23. “The Boy’s Own Annual,” 20, 47, 111, 136, 365.  
 an Old One, “Keeping Your End Up,” *The Boy’s Own Annual* 1918/1919, 19.  
 24. “The Boy’s Own Annual,” 275.  
 25. “The Girl’s Own Annual,” 440, 581, 664, 708.  
 26. “The Girl’s Own Annual,” 116.  
 27. Old One, “Keeping Your End Up,” 19.

it was as a signifier for decency and helpfulness, boys were exhorted to show their Christianity in adulthood by being honest in their business dealings; integrating religion into a form of ethical capitalism.<sup>28</sup> The *GOP*, however, made direct editorial intervention in the readers’ religious lives, exhorting them to give up worldly pleasures, and sublimate their own needs to those of others.<sup>29</sup> Prayers were interspersed amongst the content, with themes such as purity and forbearance.<sup>30</sup> Poetry was far more introspective than in *BOP*, and was used to explore themes of religion, disability, and the afterlife.<sup>31</sup> The difference in gender roles across the papers was compounded by the broad readership of the *GOP*. Under the editorship of Flora Klickmann from 1908 to 1933, the *GOP* carried the sub-title “and Woman’s Magazine”, and competition entries and letters demonstrate that readership was diverse, with readers as young as seven and some in their fifties.<sup>32</sup> This breadth of audience was reflected in content which often tended to focus on marriage, domesticity and domestic crafts. The *BOP* appeared to focus more consistently on the boy-reader.

### The Magazines in 1955

Four decades later in the mid-1950s, the organisational structure and management of the papers had altered significantly. The magazines were under the management of Lutterworth Periodicals, an ostensibly private company which nonetheless remained closely linked to the Society. *GOP* had been renamed as *Heiress*, and was now aimed at a teenage audience.<sup>33</sup> The narrower and significantly younger audience of *Heiress* inevitably impacted upon the content, and there was more about boyfriends and imagined futures than the realities of married life.<sup>34</sup> Careers were now portrayed as viable, but the world of work was seen as a place of confusion, offering too much choice for girls to cope with.<sup>35</sup> Fictional content continued to indicate that marriage was the ultimate fulfilment rather than a career. In “The Spell is Broken” the lead female character can only become a great ballet dancer after she accepts the romantic advances of a would-be boyfriend.<sup>36</sup> In “Two’s A Crowd” the heroine, a fiercely independent mechanic, is instantly transformed from combative to compliant when her male companion becomes romantically interested in her.<sup>37</sup> Independence was, therefore, acceptable whilst single, but, much as forty years before, women’s role in romance was a submissive one. Virtue and kindness were portrayed as the key factors in attracting the opposite sex, and the *Heiress* “Girl of the Year” for 1955 was lauded because she was “cool and collected without being in the least sophisticated”.<sup>38</sup> Simplicity, virtue and passivity remained central to the construction of femininity in the paper.

28. Lord Leverhulme, “The True Road to Success: A Business Talk to Boys,” *The Boy’s Own Annual* 1918/1919, 13–15.  
 29. Flora Klickmann, “The Joy That Remains,” *The Girl’s Own Annual* 1915/1916, 21–22.  
 30. Rev J E Ward, “Prayers of Unfolding Womanhood,” *The Girl’s Own Annual* 1915/1916, 13.  
 31. Coulson Kernahan, “The Little Hunchback in the Hayfield,” *The Girl’s Own Annual* 1915/1916, 14–15.  
 32. Kirsten Drotner, *English Children and Their Magazines, 1751–1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 156.  
 Doughty, *Selections from the Girl’s Own Paper, 1880–1907*.  
 Forrester, *Great-Grandmama’s Weekly: A Celebration of the Girl’s Own Paper 1880 – 1901*, 25.  
 33. “General Committee Minutes, Uscl,” 29<sup>th</sup> April 1941.  
 “Minutes of Lutterworth Periodicals Board Meetings,” 25<sup>th</sup> August 1949 and 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1949.  
 34. “Heiress,” (London: Lutterworth Periodicals Limited, October 1955), 18–19.  
 35. “Heiress,” 38.  
 36. Pia Ainsworth, “The Spell Is Broken,” *Heiress* October 1955, 8, 45–46, 49–50, 52–53.  
 37. Margaret Prescott, “Two’s a Crowd,” *Heiress* October 1955, 21–22, 54–57.  
 38. Frances Vaughan, “Do Boys Like You?,” *Heiress* October 1955, 18–19.  
 “Patricia Comes to Town,” *Heiress* October 1955, 21–22, 54–57.

Whilst much of the content of *Heiress* seemed to look to the teenage girl's future, the *BOP* often seemed to focus more on the reader's current life and boyhood occupations, although there were some adverts for technological and naval career opportunities.<sup>39</sup> Science and exploration was also a key recurring theme within the content, and the settings for stories were far more geographically diverse than in *Heiress*.<sup>40</sup> Boys, it would appear, were still being encouraged to have broad horizons.

Many of the hobbies and interests advocated for girls in 1955 remained consistent from the 1910s with knitting, dressmaking and crafts still highly visible.<sup>41</sup> Beauty articles had, however, begun to focus far more on problematizing the female body, making it something to fight against and render acceptable through intervention.<sup>42</sup> Sport had by this stage been included, but an article on hockey, for example, was theoretical rather than practical, focusing on the history of women's involvement in the sport with no information on how to get involved.<sup>43</sup> By contrast the boys were given diagrams and practical instructions for how to play volleyball, and even advice on how to build a log cabin.<sup>44</sup> This practical focus was one of the key differences between the magazines. Boys were encouraged to try things themselves, and get outdoors and many of the adverts were focused on active hobbies such as cycling and camping, whilst girls were kept focused on occupations which effectively tied them to the home and domestic environment.<sup>45</sup>

Whilst the readers of *BOP* showed awareness of the ways in which the sexes were kept separate from each other, writing letters about segregation between boys' and girls' schools, women and girls nonetheless remained largely absent from the *BOP*.<sup>46</sup> They were, however, present on the jokes page where they appeared as stock characters such as "waitress" or "mother" to fuel the narrative of the joke.<sup>47</sup>

A key change between the 1910s and the 1950s was in the religious content of *Heiress*. In contrast to the pervasive religious tone of earlier years, *Heiress* in 1955 acknowledged that "Some may call you a fool for caring about God", and the religious content was far more restricted.<sup>48</sup> For the boys, the emphasis remained on manly action and initiative, and a fictional character in need of redemption had to achieve it in worldly terms through action, rather than by spiritual transformation.<sup>49</sup>

## Conclusion

Whilst there were some changes over time in the way in which the papers constructed gender roles, particularly around the treatment of religion in *GOP* and later *Heiress*, there was a great deal of continuity. The *BOP* and *GOP* consistently created a space where a boy could, and should, be a boy, and a girl understood and prepared for her future domestic responsibilities, and constructed an explicitly gendered set of identities which readers were invited to participate in and accept. It is of course difficult to evaluate the extent to which readers of such papers accepted and internalised the values

they perpetuated. A. C. H. Smith argues that a newspaper is "the product of a *social transaction* between producers and readers", and it is of course this sense of negotiation which makes papers and magazines dynamic over time.<sup>50</sup> Smith argues that papers "must continually situate themselves within the assumed knowledge and interests of their readership".<sup>51</sup> Readers are not, therefore, passive consumers of magazines, but can influence them and ultimately reject them. Declining readership figures show that the *BOP* and the *GOP* became far less popular as the years passed. In just five years, for example, between 1950 and 1955, *Heiress* lost 50,000 readers from its circulation, whilst *BOP* plummeted by 33,000.<sup>52</sup> By the 1950s young people had become increasingly economically independent, and were powerful consumers in their own right, actually dominating certain sectors such as records and record players.<sup>53</sup> Such spending power also enabled them to make their own reading choices rather than having magazines bought for them by their parents. Readership studies such as that carried out by J. Engledow and W. Farr in 1933, and by A. J. Jenkinson in the mid-1940s showed that they were not choosing to buy the *GOP* or the *BOP* in any significant numbers.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, reading as a whole was no longer a primary focus of expenditure, and Mark Abrams' 1959 analysis of teenage consumer spending showed that only 3.1% of young people's money went on books, papers and magazines, whilst clothing and footwear made up 19.3% of their total expenditure.<sup>55</sup>

In considering the extent to which papers such as the *GOP* and *BOP* were able to shape young people's identities, it is therefore important to remember that they were just one strand of influence. Other leisure options had increasingly opened up to young people and as early as 1933 the RTS committee had begun to cast the modern attractions of "the gramophone, wireless, cinema, motor cars, cheap motor-bus, and coach rides" and even the "daily newspaper" as the threatening "other" in a narrative where only the Society and their beleaguered readers remained loyal to the quiet pleasures of reading.<sup>56</sup> A range of other factors such as race, class, religious belief, parental influence and peer relationships, also played their part in shaping identity.

Whilst it is difficult to establish the extent of the papers' influence upon young people, the *Boy's Own Paper* and *Girl's Own Paper* are valuable sources of historical evidence when viewed as the physical expressions of a dialogue between those who wished to address young people and shape their culture, and those young people themselves. As such they demonstrate the ways in which private identities can be, and are, contested and constructed in public forums.

39. "Boy's Own Paper," (London: Lutterworth Periodicals Limited, July 1955), inside cover, 2, 6, 12.

40. "Boy's Own Paper," 20, 24-30, 32.

41. "Heiress," 16, 22-23, 34.

42. Judy, "Is This Your Beauty Problem?," *Heiress* October 1955, 40-41.

43. Marjorie Pollard, "In a Brighton Tea-Shop," *Heiress*, October 1955 1955, 42-43.

44. Don Anthony, "Volleyball Is a Thrilling Game," *Boy's Own Paper* July 1955, 31, 59.

Post page in "Boy's Own Paper," 13.

45. "Boy's Own Paper," inside cover, 3, 4, 6, 14, 15.

46. "Boy's Own Paper," 10.

47. "Boy's Own Paper," 19.

48. Charles Haig, "Treasure Trove," *Heiress* October 1955, 62.

49. Hugh B Cave, "Phantom Fortune," *Boy's Own Paper* July 1955, 20-21, 55.

50. A. C. H. Smith, Elizabeth Immirzi, and Trevor Blackwell, *Paper Voices: The Popular Press and Social Change 1935-1965* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1975), 22.

51. Smith, Immirzi and Blackwell, *Paper Voices*, 22.

52. "Minutes of Lutterworth Periodicals Board Meetings" 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1950 and 1<sup>st</sup> November 1955.

53. Mark Abrams, *Teenage Consumer Spending in 1959 (Part 2) : Middle Class and Working Class Boys and Girls* (London Press Exchange, 1961), 4-5.

54. A. J. Jenkinson, *What Do Boys and Girls Read? : An Investigation into Reading Habits with Suggestions About the Teaching of Literature in Secondary and Senior Schools*, 2nd ed., Contributions to Modern Education (1946).

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