FANTASY, HUMOR AND PLYMOUTH’S OWN ABBY MORTON DIAZ

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The years between 1860 and 1900 brought dramatic changes in children’s literature. American’s view of children was changing once again as childhood became increasingly romanticized. Two new types of children’s literature became popular: the domestic novel, middle class in setting and values, with a young female heroine - domestic and patient - serving as a catalyst for moral improvement; and the adventure novel, starring an assertive and mischievous young boy, romanticizing the freedom of boyhood. The same virtues promoted by earlier children’s literature (kindness, honesty, truthfulness, self-reliance and hard work) were still being promoted. These were now seen not as necessary for salvation, but instead as necessary for a happy and productive life.

Some authors did transcend the bounds imposed by post-Civil War America. Among the foremost is Louisa May Alcott. The themes found in her most celebrated book, *Little Women*, were the sentimental themes familiar to her audience - an idealized childhood, an absent father, the affecting death of one of the "little women," moral lessons learned through self-sacrifice, poverty yet gentility. Alcott broke through the conventions, however, in creating strong and believable young characters, with faults as well as virtues, and with active - even "boyish" - heroines who are purposeful and practical in a way that young female characters were seldom allowed to be.

The 1860s also saw the reappearance of literature for the very very young, a genre that had languished since the first Rollo books were written in the 1830s. Sophie May (actually Rebecca Sophia Clark) was a prolific writer of series books for young children and introduced "baby talk" to children’s fiction. This was a distinct break with the earlier tradition of American children’s literature, which had encouraged children to grow up more rapidly and reach independence at an early age.

Books of gentle humor, even books of imagination, anathema to parents of an earlier age, now became popular. Authors used humor to make their young characters more realistic, children were frequently depicted engaged in amusing but harmless misadventures. The humorous tale for children is a major American contribution to children’s literature.

Fantasy writing was slower to win acceptance in America. Because of the strong Puritan hostility to what was seen as "dishonesty," the fairy tales that became so popular on continental Europe during the late 17th century - including such classic stories as Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Rapunzel, Puss in Boots and Little Red Riding Hood - did not flourish in England or in the English colonies in America. Many of these fairy tales were not in fact originally geared towards children. It was not until the early 19th century that the Brothers Grimm (Jacob and Wilhelm) began to write fairy tales for children and to eliminate plot elements from the earlier tales that could be deemed unsuitable for children. The Grimms were followed by Hans Christian Anderson, writing in the 1830s, who combined fairy tale plots with humor, Christian sentiments and middle-class values. With the breakthrough translation into English in 1846 of the child-safe and respectable works of Hans Christian Anderson, fairy tales not only achieved popularity in England but inspired such great English writers as Charles Dickens, Lewis Carroll and George MacDonald.

The first American author to successfully introduce elements of fantasy into the canon of children's literature was Nathaniel Hawthorne. His ***Wonder Book*** (1852), followed up by ***Tanglewood Tales***, retold Greek and Roman mythology in a manner appropriate for children, including some new characters reflecting middle-class Victorian families.

Other American authors also attempted to write in this genre but without great success, largely because they adapted European models with results that often seemed awkward and foreign to American audiences. In 1859, for example, Jane G. Austin wrote a fantasy book, ***Fairy Dreams*** (with illustrations by Hammatt Billings, designer of the original canopy over Plymouth Rock and the National Monument to the Forefathers). It was not a success. Austin later wrote a number of very popular novels for adults based on Pilgrim stories, beginning with the ***Nameless Nobleman*** in 1881.

The first children's book written by Plymouthean Abby Morton Diaz was a fairy tale. ***The Entertaining Story of King Bronde: His Lily and His Rosebud***, published by Ticknor & Fields in 1869, is an elaborate and contrived tale involving a myriad of plot elements not often found combined into a single short book: giants, fairies who grant wishes to newborn princesses, a woodcutter's son and stolen royal children and secret identities, enchantments and perils and eventual happily-ever-afters. Although the plot is overcomplicated and ineffective, the story is notable for Diaz's vivid descriptions and her technique of speaking directly to her reader:

And could you have entered the palace itself, and have kept your eyes from being blinded by the bright colors, the sparkling ornaments, and all the splendor of this wonderful place, and have wandered on and on, through the spacious apartments, you would at last have come to an ivory door, over which was perched a red-and-green parrot. This parrot was fed upon flowers made from crystals of white sugar; and had you given him one of these he would have told you a riddle. But this, of course, you could not know.

After this one unsuccessful foray into the make-believe world of palaces and parrots, Diaz turned her descriptive powers to the New England world in which she lived. For the rest of her very productive literary life, she wrote about the people and places she knew and loved with an increasingly assured and imaginative voice that made her one of the most popular children's authors of her time.

Abby Morton, born in 1821, grew up in the Wellingsley area of Plymouth, in the "Hobs Hole House" that still stands on Sandwich Street. She described it in a 1900 article in the ***New England Magazine*** as a "low gambrel-roofed house a mile south from the town centre - the family of our Pilgrim ancestor, George Morton, having taken their land in that locality. Our homestead grounds reached to the shore, where were my father's wharf and shipyard."

Abby's father Ichabod Morton was temperance, abolitionist and an educational reformer of note. By Abby's description, he was "tall, erect, earnest in bearing, usually of serious aspect and much given to planning for the kingdom of heaven to come on earth…" His life was a continual balancing act between his reforming inclinations and his strong business sense. According to Plymouth historian William T. Davis, "For a short time his [Ichabod Morton's] business was interrupted by his association with the Brook Farm enterprise, but the dreams of that social experiment soon gave way to the practical pursuits of business life." Ralph Waldo Emerson characterized Ichabod Morton as "a plain man formerly engaged through many years in the fisheries with success, eccentric, with a persevering interest in education, and of a very democratic religion, came and built a house on the farm [Brook Farm]."

Brook Farm was one of the idealistic and utopian Transcendentalist communities of the mid-19th century. Located in central Massachusetts, it survived for only 6 years, from 1841-1847. Ichabod Morton was one of the original Trustees. He built a home, known as "Pilgrim House," at Brook Farm but left there and returned to Plymouth after only two weeks. Brook Farm, organized as a commune, combined a farm and a school. The farm was never a great success - the soil was poor and its communalist approach did not encourage productivity. The school, however, was a success. It had three levels: a nursery for the youngest, a primary division for those up to 10 years old, and an advanced section for those heading for college (6 additional years of school) or farming (3 additional years of school). The curriculum was progressive; students and teachers engaged in discussion, discipline was informal. While the Brook Farm community never numbered more than 200, thousands visited to share in its intellectual stimulation.

Abby Morton shared her father's crusading instincts, joining a juvenile antislavery society while a Plymouth teenager. In early 1843, having just turned 21, she joined the Brook Farm community as a teacher in the "Infant School" for children under the age of 6. John Van Der Zee Sears, in ***My Friends at Brook Farm*** remembered that:

The one person best qualified to take care of these toddlers was a charming young lady, Miss Abby Morton, whose sincere interest in children invariably gained their young affections … Her first object was to make them happy and contented, and to this end she invented and arranged games and songs and stories, contrived little incidents and managed little surprises with never failing ingenuity. Learning as well as teaching, she gradually gave a purposeful bent to her song-and-dance diversions, making them effective lessons as well as pleasant pastimes…
It was no wonder that she [Abby Morton Diaz] could write letters and stories appealing to children. Her understanding and her sympathies brought her in close touch with them. She knew their minds and their hearts, their likes and their dislikes and what she wrote of them and for them they accepted, knowing that every word was true to nature.

A younger "Brook Farmer," Ora Gannett Sedgwick remembered Abby Morton as "very dear to me, and whose peculiar combination of liveliness and dignity, together with her beautiful singing, made her a favorite with all the members, old and new."

By the autumn of 1845, Abby had returned to Plymouth for her marriage to Manuel A. Diaz of Havana, whom she had probably met at Brook Farm (among the residents of Brooke Farm were young men, students from Manila, Havana and Florida who were "prepping" for Harvard College). The ***Plymouth Vital Records*** record that:

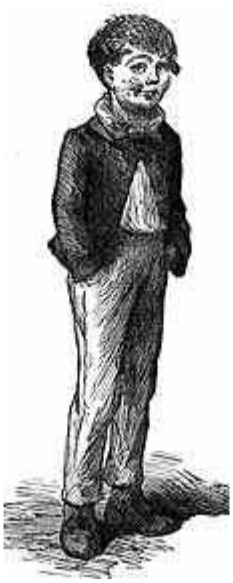
Manuel A. Diaz of Havana, age 22, son of Manual A & Isabel B. Diaz, mar[ried]. Oct. 6, 1845, by Rev. James Kendall of Plymouth, Abby Morton, single of Plymouth, age 23, dau. of Ichabod & Martha Morton.

Two children were born, Roberto in 1847 and Manuel in 1849. The marriage did not last, however, and Abby was left to raise her boys on her own.

For some time she taught singing and dancing and did practical nursing in Plymouth. Harriet A. Townsend, writing in ***Reminiscences of Famous Women*,** remembered the stories her friend Abby Morton Diaz told about this time in her life:

The story of her village dancing classes is very amusing; the music was usually provided by an old, blind fiddler, to whom Mrs. Diaz sang the directions; if for any reason the musician failed to appear, she sang all the music for the dances, and such rare rollicking roundelays as she could sing all her life, to the delight of the children she met on the way. Mrs. Diaz was a born teacher, and her inventive *faculties were marvelous. No picnic, festival or good time in her native town was complete unless she was there to plan and direct.*

Abby Morton Diaz's career as a professional writer began when the ***Atlantic Monthly*** published a short story in 1861. A number of other children's short stories followed. Her first full book, the unsuccessful fairy-tale, appeared in 1869.



With her next book, published the following year (although it had been introduced to the public slightly earlier as a serial in a juvenile publication), she abandoned the mannered European model of fantasy and instead wrote a simple story of a young New England boy and his extended loving family. ***The William Henry Letters*** was to prove her most enduringly popular book.

The book is introduced by an "editor," in the character of a family friend who presents a series of letters featuring William Henry, a motherless 10-year-old boy whose father has sent him to boarding school because "Grandmother was spoiling him." These literary techniques - the "editor" who functions as narrator and the use of letters which naturally include realistic dialogue and conversation - play brilliantly to Diaz's strengths, allowing her in a natural and unforced manner to speak directly to the reader and to freely use her vivid descriptive powers.

In the letters, William Henry comes to life - a good, but not saintly, boy as described by his best school friend Dorry:

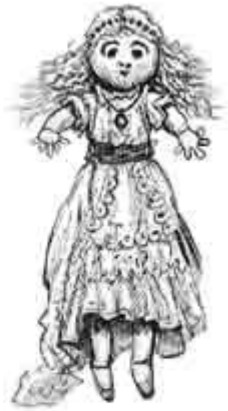
He's got a furious head of hair, and freckles. But we don't think at all about his looks now. If anything, we like his looks. He's just as pleasant and gen'rous, and not a mean thing about him. I don't believe he would tell a lie to save his life. I know he wouldn't. He's always willing to help everybody. And had just as lief give anyting away as not. And when he plays, he plays fair.

The reader also comes to know and love William Henry's family and friends: Grandmother who worries (is William Henry warm, is he eating right, does he have the measles, has he drowned?), Aunt Phebe who knits the family's stories into the colored stripes of her comforter - dark stripes for quarrels and domestic mishaps and bright stripes for successes and cheerful happenings, little sister Georgianna who is so very proud of the light blue and totally impractical boots her fond Uncle Jacob has bought, William Henry's friend Dorry whose wealthy mother "was not particularly fond of boys," the school bully that ran away to sea and eventually reformed, fat and cheerful Bubby Short. The readers share in picnics and clambakes, visits to the village and to classmates' homes, schoolboy scrapes and the misadventures of growing up.

The William Henry Letters* combines the best techniques** of America's late 19th century children's authors. The setting is middle class in values, serving as a catalyst for moral improvement; Diaz's characters are strong and believable. The virtues she promotes are simple - laughter, hard work, honesty and kindness; and the moral lessons to be learned are leavened by a merry wit, naturalistic dialogue and a deep affection for the characters. ***The William Henry Letters was among the first of the American "real boy" stories. Its mischievous and good-hearted young hero, who grows as he ages, paved the way for a series of other notable boy characters, culminating in Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. ***The William Henry Letters*** was one of the three books declared by Theodore Roosevelt to be the favorite stories of his boyhood, "because," he said, "they were first-class, good, healthy stories, interesting in the first place, and in the next place teaching manliness, decency, and good conduct."

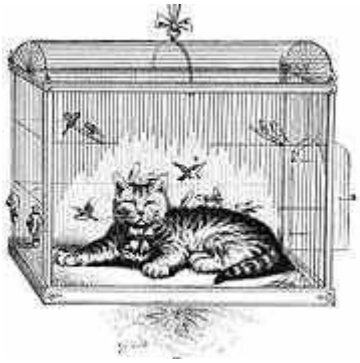
In addition to two sequels to *The William Henry Letters* aimed at slightly older audiences, Diaz also continued to create memorable characters in books aimed at even younger children. In 1878, ***The Jimmyjohns and Other Stories*** were published. "The Jimmyjohns" are active little boys, twin brothers Jimmy Plummer and Johnny Plummer, aged four years and ten months. We join them as they explore their small world of ponds and fields and ocean shore.

We meet their family, and their family's family in the form of sister Annetta's baby dolls: Joey Moonbeam, Dorothy Beeswax, Betsey Ginger and Polly Cologne, "the smallest, the prettiest, and the cunningest," who several years later became the heroine of her own book.



Polly Cologne relates the adventures of a lost doll, carried off into the fields by the family dog Rover, discovered by a botanist and brought to the city where she enjoys gentle and unexpected adventures, is lost and found and loved by a poor crippled child, and finally returned to her owner.

Diaz also continued to experiment with fantasy stories for children. After her first unfortunate experiment, however, she generally avoided giants and robbers, writing instead gentle tales of dreaming flowers awakening after a long winter and cats at tea parties.



Diaz's whimsical side flourished in 1881 with a domestic fantasy book for young children, ***King Grimalkum and Pussyanita; or the Cats' Arabian Nights***, in which the heroine, "a beautiful creature just out of kittenhood" enthralls the stern and hard-hearted jet black king whose eyes were "of the true royal yellow" with tales of her twenty-seven times great grandmother Pinky-white who couldn't "catch," Black Velvet who was blown off a tree in a whirlwind and went to sea in a baby's crib, and Tabby Furpurr who found a way of not liking (to eat) birds.

Also published in 1881, was Diaz's ***Chronicles of the Stimpcett Family*****,** cataloguing the humorous disasters of a crazily accident-prone family who somehow always found their way home safely.

In addition to her children's stories, Abby Morton Diaz wrote extensively on woman's role in family and society. Titles include ***The Schoolmaster's Trunk: Containing Papers on Home-life in Tweenit*** (1874), ***The Domestic Problem: Work and Culture in the Household*** (1875), and ***Bybury to Beacon Street*** (1887). The strength of these books, as with her writings for children, lay in their grounding in Diaz's New England roots. Not only are the characters and situations drawn from Plymouth life, often so is the geography ("Tweenit" is Plymouth between South Street and Bayview Avenue). Serious in intent yet domestic in tone, they showcase Diaz's ear for natural dialogue and her irrepressible sense of humor.

Abby Morton Diaz left Plymouth during the mid 1870's, after her sons were grown. Moving to Boston (and later still to Belmont), she continued her writing and became a leader in educational and philanthropic organizations for women. She was one of the founders of the Women's Educational and Industrial Union, serving as an officer from 1877-1902.

Abby Morton Diaz died in Belmont, Massachusetts, on April 1, 1904. She is buried in Mount Auburn Cemetery. Her friend Harriet Townsend remembered her as:

Unselfish to a fault, her modesty as to attainments was unusual. Mrs. Diaz was the soul and heart of every good object which she originated or espoused, and she fairly radiated life and sunshine… The kindly brown eyes, the strong hand extended to greet a new friend, the simple and neat attire so in accord with her principles, all helped to make a rare personality. This busy earnest life went on giving joy and courage wherever it touched, for a period of four score years and more.

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