



Fig. 1. John Raphael Smith, after James Northcote, *A Visit to the Grandmother*, 1785, mezzotint, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.



Fig. 2. Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller, *Children on Their Way Home from School*, 1836, oil on paper mounted on wood, 44.5 x 34.5 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.



Fig. 3. Thérèse Schwartze, *Mother and Her Children in Church*, 1886, oil on canvas, 195.6 x 139.7 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

The Dichotomy Between Liberty and Control: The Book as a Social Narrative Device in Depictions of the Family

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The introduction of the printing press to the West by Johannes Gutenberg (ca. 1398–1468) in around 1440 revolutionized the function of the book in society, expanding its accessibility from the privileged individual to the masses. By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the book had emerged as a nexus for discussion on social, political and economic matters concerning European family life. In response to this development Garrett Stewart, a scholar in narrative theory and visuality studies, asks why artists felt the need to “labor so intensely to evoke the unpicturable space, and often illegible page, of textual fascination.”¹ This essay attempts to provide some answers with depictions of what James Heffernan, a professor in the art of writing, defines as “lectoral art”: “pictures of books and other reading matter that could be read by anyone actually or potentially present within the space depicted.”² The objective of this essay is to explore the book as a device in maintaining or subverting the status quo. From the perspective of three works, including John Raphael Smith’s (1752–1812) *A Visit to the Grandmother* (1785) (fig. 1), Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller’s (1793–1865) *Children on Their Way Home from School* (1836) (fig. 2) and Thérèse Schwartze’s (1851–1918) *Mother and Her Children in Church* (1886) (fig. 3), this exhibition essay will consider the book as a narrative device used to address controversial issues around family and the education of children in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European art.

The earliest work is the popular late eighteenth-century mezzotint engraving *A Visit to the Grandmother*,³ copied by English painter and mezzotint engraver John Raphael Smith after a painting by English artist James Northcote (1746–1831).⁴



Fig. 1. John Raphael Smith, after James Northcote, *A Visit to the Grandmother*, 1785, mezzotint, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

This image is of two women, presumably sisters, sitting in a semi-circle with their grandmother.⁵ The middle figure is helping her grandmother with her intricate sewing while her sister reads aloud to the group. Symbolizing domestic comfort,⁶ a reclining cat on the left looks out at the viewer. The tranquil atmosphere of the scene belies the cultural anxiety towards the female reader in the eighteenth century on account of the close association of reading with sexual illicitness, moral degeneration and worldly knowledge inappropriate to women.⁷

Consequently, during this era, men—and some women—of the upper classes feared the

development of women's education; "it was the fear of women assuming greater power that caused the most unease."⁸ Though looking out at the viewers, the feline stands in for these authoritarian figures, its mere presence imbuing the scene with surveillance. Moreover, evangelical ideology, which was a growing influence, attributed moral value to female domesticity. However, as time progressed, men realized that they could not stop women from becoming literate. In response, they created what they deemed appropriate literature for women: conduct books advised them on how to be spiritually acceptable, good wives, perfect mothers and managers of a household.⁹

Through the dissemination of books on conduct and female education, men attempted to censor and control women's mobility and their capacity to acquire knowledge, with the ultimate aim of securing men's place in the public working sphere and women's place in the private domestic sphere.¹⁰ Approximately twenty years prior to the production of Smith's engraving, Scottish clergyman Dr. James Fordyce (1720–1796) published *Sermons to Young Women* (1766), a two-volume compendium of sermons that encouraged female subjugation and a feminine manner of speech, action and appearance.¹¹ Not surprisingly, more and more women began to reject these books as "the law" for women. In fact, some women authors created parodies of the conduct book, such as Jane Collier's (1714–1755) mock advice manual *An Essay on the Art of Ingeniously Tormenting* (1753), which explains how to be an intolerable wife and an infuriating employer.¹²

Apart from instructional literature, leisurely reading became tremendously popular among women, and was encouraged but also monitored for content. Smith's engraving of Northcote's

work presents a “proper” scene of domestic leisure, as the contents of the book are being recited aloud by the girl to a group, “rather than [by] the lone figure of solo reading,”¹³ who was often associated with dangerous, inappropriate female fantasies. Described as “[a] charming image of family duty and pleasure,”¹⁴ this work is rendered “in a quintessential Victorian mode, ensconced, cozy, intimate, and familial.”¹⁵ The contents of the book in the picture remain a mystery, as it has a plain black cover and the pages are hidden from the viewer. Is it a pious text, or one of those illustrious fantasy novels for which London publishers were becoming infamous?¹⁶ Although the viewer is included in an “extended cast” that participates in the activity of this scene, the girl’s oral reading “breaks a silence to which its canvas must still submit,”¹⁷ and thus the viewer remains in the dark about the book’s contents. In any case, the grandmother’s attentive expression and parted mouth show that she is enthralled by the narrative. The lady in the centre appears to be in reverie, visualizing in her mind the story being told. The cat, gazing at the viewer and positioned directly opposite the book in the girl’s hands, draws the viewer’s attention to the book, reflecting the intense monitoring of books and women readers during this era. The significance of the cat leads us to question the purpose of the book as an instructive or liberating device. The book thus suggests polarizing effects as either a strict tool of oppression or as a method of escapism.

The book as a political instrument is captured in Waldmüller’s painting *Children on Their Way Home from School*. Here two Bavarian peasant children are carrying textbooks on their way home from the village school.¹⁸ The artist’s intention to go beyond the aesthetics of the painting to stress the subject of education is evident in the central positioning of the schoolbooks and slate in the image. Scenes of peasants in schools were not uncommon in Waldmüller’s time,¹⁹

reflecting the prominence of peasant education as a social issue in Bavaria in the first half of the nineteenth century.

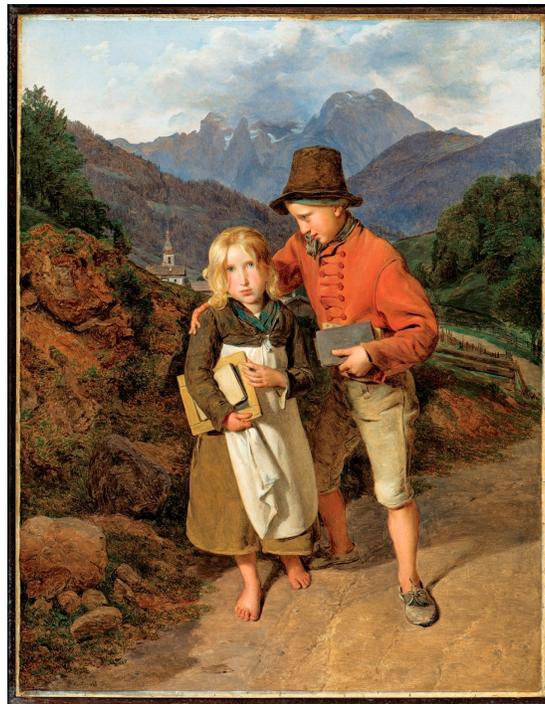


Fig. 2. Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller, *Children on Their Way Home from School*, 1836, oil on paper mounted on wood, 44.5 x 34.5 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

In 1836, the same year Waldmüller completed *Children on Their Way Home from School*, a young American professor named Calvin Ellis Stowe (1802–1886) travelled to Europe and, upon his return, reported that “[e]verywhere he went, it seemed educational advances were being marked by children of the common people who were for the first time attending schools.” Stowe declared that the most advanced of all European countries was Prussia, followed by Bavaria.²⁰ Prussian and Bavarian educational reforms during this period were initiated with the intention that schooling would “be an instrument for [the] integration of people acquired in the countless boundary shifts that accompanied the French Revolution.”²¹ Fearing the collapse of traditional

feudal society, political leaders initiated a highly controlled, patriarchal system of public education intended to counteract peasant dissent and revolt.

Waldmüller's painting may be understood as a visual response to these conservative social and educational imperatives. In *Children on their Way Home from School*, the artist places the children in a landscape that emphasizes barriers; this includes the numerous overlapping mountains in the background and the frontal placement of the children at the bend of a steep mountain road they have climbed. The church school from which they have come can be seen at a distance in the village below. The boy and girl are in close proximity, and the older boy's arm is securely placed around the girl's shoulder. The boy's concerned gaze focuses on the younger child, as though he is anxiously expecting her to follow him. The difficulty of the journey home is emphasized by the rough path, the girl's bare feet and the boy's tattered shoes.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there were numerous debates over whether education was a tool for liberation, freeing people from the ignorance of illiteracy to better themselves economically, or whether it would be used politically to control the minds of the masses.²² King Ludwig I of Bavaria (1786–1868) saw the education system as a political tool of social control. Concerned that teachers were using school funding for revolutionary movements, he instituted “Teacher-Training Regulations” to appropriately prepare teachers for a religiously based, state-controlled education.²³ It is probably not a coincidence that in the same year that *Children on Their Way Home from School* was painted, Bavarian Minister of the Interior Eduard von Schenck (1823–1897), in a well-publicized text given at a gathering of educators, reminded those assembled that “their task was to prepare a teacher who would be satisfied to be the ‘first

and most important assistant to the clergyman’.”²⁴As such, with textbooks and a slate in their hands, the boy and girl in Waldmüller’s painting journey home from a church school where the teacher would have been strictly supervised by a clergyman. The long road that these new peasant students are on not only evokes the hardships of peasant life, but also signifies an unknown future.

The significance of the book in the late-nineteenth-century painting *Mother and Her Children in Church* reflects the long history of educational difficulties that emerged after the French Revolution (1789–99). The rise in the cost of private religious education in the Netherlands following the Primary Education Act of 1878 meant that poor Protestants and Catholics could no longer send their children to the schools of their choice.²⁵ However, freedom of education—the concept that people should be able to choose between a religious or public school under equal financial conditions—had been declared a basic human right during the French Revolution.²⁶ Nevertheless, dire poverty deprived many of a basic education, whether secular or religious.



Fig. 3. Thérèse Schwartze, *Mother and Her Children in Church*, 1886, oil on canvas, 195.6 x 139.7 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

While Schwartze was known as a portrait artist who typically painted the wealthy, *Mother and Her Children in Church* depicts a peasant woman sitting with her three children against the back wall of a church. The mother is holding her infant protectively under her coat while she clasps her sleeping daughter's hand. Her son is standing behind his mother with a book in hand, presumably a bible or religious text. A poster on the left wall dated February 1886 is most likely a call for charity. Schwartze's rendering of this fatherless family is an idealized portrait of the daily life of the common people in difficult circumstances. The women and children are in fact models who wear the same pristine costumes that Schwartze used in other sentimental works of the same theme.²⁷ The boy may be reading a religious text but help from the Church does not seem to be available. Furthermore, the responsibility of education and its opportunities appears to fall on the boy, the only male in the family. The future of the family therefore depends on the

boy. The viewer is left wondering whether his ability to read will lead to economic mobility or socio-religious control and persisting poverty.

The works examined in this essay have uncovered how education was accessible to some social groups and strictly controlled for others in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. *A Visit to the Grandmother*, engraved by Smith after Northcote in the late eighteenth century, exposes the significance of reading for women either as a liberating from of escape through the illustrious novel, or as a method of control through texts such as conduct books. In Waldmüller's *Children on Their Way Home from School*, the books being carried by the peasant children signify a sense of liberty through education reform, or control through religious intervention, such as when Church and State unite. Finally, the book in Schwartz's piece explores the financial element of liberty and control, unmasking the religious and secular educational limitations intrinsically linked to one's economic status. In all realms of the social sphere, the dichotomy of liberty and control lives through the image of the book, permeating the commonplace and high culture.

NOTES

¹ Garrett Stewart, *The Look of Reading: Book, Painting, Text* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 2.

² *Ibid.*, 7.

³ Mezzotint achieves tonality by roughening the plate with thousands of little dots made by a metal tool with small teeth, called a "rocker." In printing, the tiny pits in the plate hold the ink when the face of the plate is wiped clean. A high level of quality and richness in the print can be achieved. See Carol Wax, *The Mezzotint: History and Technique* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996).

⁴ Northcote states that many copies of Smith's engraving *A Visit to the Grandmother* were sold, and that five different impressions of it were produced in Paris. See William Hazlitt, *Conversations of James Northcote, R.A.* (London: H. Colburn and R. Bentley, 1830), 10.

⁵ Although it is uncertain whether these two ladies are mother and daughter or two sisters, they are described as “two young fashionably-dressed young ladies sitting with their grandmother.” See “*NORTHCOTE, After James, R.A. (1746-1831), A Visit to the Grandmother*,” Donald Heald Rare Books, Prints & Maps, accessed January 12, 2016, <http://www.donaldheald.com/pages/books/6587/after-james-northcote-r-a/a-visit-to-the-grandmother>.

⁶ Elisabeth Foucart-Walter and Pierre Rosenberg, *The Painted Cat: The Cat in Western Painting from the Fifteenth to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), 24.

⁷ This stood in contrast to concurrent depictions of the male reader that associated him with power and authority. However, the only appropriate form of literature for women was religious texts. See Belinda Jack, *The Woman Reader* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 92.

⁸ Jack, 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰ These conduct books also aimed to discourage and censor women from reading novels such as Jane Austen’s (1775–1817) *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), which contains a scene where Mr. Collins selects a conduct book to read out loud to his young female cousin. Lydia Bennet cannot bear to hear another word and interrupts the sanctimonious Mr. Collins in full flow, when he states that: “I have often observed how little young ladies are interested by books of a serious stamp, though written solely for their benefit. It amazes me, I confess;—for, certainly, there can be nothing so advantageous to them as instruction. But I will no longer importune my young cousin.” See Jack, 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Garrett Stewart, “The Mind’s Sigh: Pictured Reading in Nineteenth-Century Painting,” *Victorian Studies* 46, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 221.

¹⁴ “*NORTHCOTE, After James, R.A. (1746-1831)*.”

¹⁵ Stewart, “The Mind’s Sigh,” 221.

¹⁶ Jane Austen’s works are examples.

¹⁷ Stewart, “The Mind’s Sigh,” 221.

¹⁸ The setting is identified as Bavaria based on the recognizable Bavarian Alps in the background of the work. See Janice Arnold, “MMFA Returns Nazi-Looted Art,” *Canadian Jewish News*, April 26, 2013, <http://www.cjnews.com/news/canada/mmfa-returns-nazi-looted-art>.

¹⁹ Richard R. Brettell and Caroline Brettell, *Painters and Peasants in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Rizzoli; Geneva: Skira, 1983), 104.

²⁰ Karl A. Schleunes, *Schooling and Society: The Politics of Education in Prussia and Bavaria, 1750–1900* (Oxford; New York: Berg Publishers, 1989), 1–2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

²² *Ibid.*, 5.

²³ *Ibid.*, 103.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Anne Bert Dijkstra and Jaap Dronkers, “Education Between State and Private Delivery: Civil Society as Equilibrium. The Dutch Case,” in *Education Contested: Changing Relations Between State, Market and Civil Society in Modern European Education*, ed. Jules L. Peschar and Marieke van der Wal (Lisse: Swets & Zeitlinger, 2000), 105.

²⁶ Ibid., 106.

²⁷ An example is *Poor yet Rich*, 1887, oil on canvas, 160 x 110 cm, private collection.
<http://www.the-athenaeum.org/art/detail.php?ID=82065>.

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