THE CHILD READER AND AMERICAN LITERATURE, 1700-1852

DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

As the large numbers of children’s books published in early America indicate, child readers played a major role in the spread of literacy and the rise of print culture in the new nation. Even more strikingly, the most popular American literary texts, from Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* to Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*, were primarily addressed to a child audience. Even texts that were not originally addressed to children, such as Washington Irving’s “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, quickly became the province of young readers, leading to later arguments that, in the words of D.H. Lawrence, “the old-fashioned American classics” are “children's books.” Yet, while much work has been done on particular kinds of early American readers, such as the female reader, the child reader has often been overlooked by critics perhaps eager to counter age-old claims that American literature, and hence the study of it, is “childish.” My dissertation tells the story of how and why children came to be central figures in the formation of the American reading public, focusing on key historical moments in which the figure of the child reader instigated larger shifts in the cultural understanding of literature and citizenship. In particular, I argue that children’s reading practices played a crucial role in narratives about the origins, activities, and limitations of American citizenship, suggesting that the ideal American citizen and reader was, first and foremost, a child.
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In 1845, children’s book author Samuel Goodrich presented his readers with a new edition of the first children’s book that he had ever published, *The Tales of Peter Parley about America*. In his preface to this final revision, Goodrich looks back upon the history of the work’s reception and, in the process, makes a compelling statement about children’s position in the American republic: “It is now several years since this little work was given to the public . . . The public—I mean the world of children—have bestowed upon it their favor, and I ask no more.”  

In this passage, it is unclear whether Goodrich’s assertion that not only his readership, but also the larger public, is composed of children is a clarification or a slip. Either way, his link between the public and “the world of children” suggests that young readers were important to the early American imagination of its populace, both in terms of the reading public and the broader national community of citizens.

*Peter Parley* itself goes on to corroborate the child’s importance to America’s foundations by narrating the nation’s political origins not from an adult point of view, but from that of a child. Goodrich, in the voice of Parley, suggests that children are not merely witnesses to American history and governance, but figures for citizenship in general; he explains that the president is “like a father, and the people are like his children. He watches over them . . . and he takes care that the laws are obeyed and the
people protected.” In his *Recollections of a Lifetime* (1857), Goodrich grants children a more active role as citizens by claiming that his aging narrator, Peter Parley, was nominated for president on the “children’s ticket.” While it is tempting to dismiss these images as oversimplifications for children, my research suggests that they draw their significance from a larger organizing principle of American politics, which has often aligned childhood and citizenship. This close relationship between children and citizens is repeatedly visible in U.S. history, but it has not often been explored as a central force in the establishment of an American literary tradition or in the history of American politics, perhaps due to long-standing anxieties that the nation, and hence the study of it, is “childish.” As Caroline F. Levander and Carol J. Singley note in their recent anthology:

> [T]he American nation, since its inception, has been identified with and imagined as a child, yet the full significance of this alliance and its relevance to critical inquiries into the figure of the child have yet to be fully understood.

I argue that the many metaphors and references to children were not isolated or incidental; rather, they point to what was a central imagination of the American reading and civic public as a republic of children.

This association between childhood and citizenship has taken many forms. Goodrich notably uses the child citizen to illustrate both patriarchal deference to a father-like ruler and the workings of representative democracy. While the normative story of American politics is often told as a transition from the first system to the second, the continued metaphor of the citizen as child suggests that the transition is much more messy and incomplete. After all, the American Revolution, in addition to representing what Jay Fliegelman has called a “revolution against patriarchal authority,” also
established the legacy of “founding fathers.” Images of children signify, among other things, the continual negotiations between patriarchal hierarchy and democratic equality in American politics. My work traces a number of such (incomplete) shifts in the American ideology of citizenship, from the Puritan inseparability of family, church, and state; to the early republican emphasis on free consent and “loving the law;” to the transcendentalist and sentimental oppositions between civic and natural/divine order. I also consider key literary texts that have figured differently in the creation of a “national” literature—the catechism and sermon, the primer, the children’s playbook, the novel, the transcendentalist manifesto, and the sentimental tale. What has been especially fascinating to me is the persistence of the child as a central image of readership and citizenship in spite of Americans’ pervasive and continuing anxieties about being a “childish” nation—an indication that children (actual and metaphorical) do powerful work in establishing, contesting, rethinking, and perhaps ultimately stabilizing the meanings of American identity. The significant work of my project has been to account specifically for the role of child readers in these negotiations, explaining how and why these readers figured so prominently in the literary productions of colonial, early Republican, post-French Revolution, and antebellum America. In particular, I argue that children’s relationships to their books allow Americans to create and re-work the continual tension between freedom and subjection in the imagination of citizenship.

Reading, of course, has long been understood as one of the ways in which citizens are created, partially due to seminal studies of early American readership by scholars such as Cathy N. Davidson and Mary Kelley. These studies make the simple but
compelling claim that the identity and practices of readers can shed as much light on the
meaning of literary texts and ideologies of citizenship as can the motives of authors and
politicians. Davidson, for instance, observes that the literal definition of citizenship in
early America does not reflect the nation’s primary readers, who were often women. This
inconsistency, supported by library registers, subscription lists, and marginalia, allows
Davidson to argue that the early American novel “subversively” calls for an expanded
notion of who counts as a citizen. In doing so, she contests the dominant story told about
American literature from the earliest days of the discipline, which claimed that the
childish and restrictive early American texts gave way to the “libratory” and imaginative
texts of the nineteenth-century.

By focusing on early American texts as complicated sites of national formation, I
also contest this narrative, but in a way that reconsiders some of Davidson’s conclusions.
Though Davidson is interested in the novel’s expansion of citizenship, her claim that the
novel is subversive all but erases the child reader, who was the target audience for the
genre’s didactic and disciplining functions. Even more frequently addressed by early
American texts than women, children also were not literally citizens. Their inclusion in
the republic of letters, and, indeed, in texts that depict the citizen’s consent to
government, claims for them a central role in defining the “free” relationship between
citizen and state. Children were appropriate images of the citizen’s freedom because
American revolutionaries frequently used childhood as a metaphor for the nation’s right
of self-determination. Even so, the centrality of children to the reading public complicates
the idea that early American texts such as novels were unambiguously, or even primarily,
arguing for an expanded definition of citizens’ rights. Despite arguments by scholars such
as Fliegleman and Gillian Brown that the U.S. witnesses a revolution in children’s rights, children are never easily or fully endowed with the ability to participate in their own governance in an informed way. In addition to acting as a symbol for the citizen’s freedom to consent, child readership has also been a powerful concept through which subjection can be legitimized, precisely because, unlike race or gender, childhood is the only state that seems to have an inherent need for protection and dependence. The female reader’s centrality to early American literature is often a condition of her limited rights and supposed childishness. By granting a voice to those members of society who do not and, by virtue of their literal or metaphorical infancy, allegedly cannot be granted with the actual rights of citizenship, the nation’s literature occupies an even more vexed position in terms of the citizen’s freedom and subjection than has been commonly assumed.

The child reader’s role as metaphorical citizen is further complicated by the early American period’s shifting understandings of literacy, which was used for both liberation and indoctrination. The story that has often been told about children’s reading is one that resembles the dominant story of the rise of American literature. Scholars such as Anne Scott MacLeod and Gillian Avery have argued that repressive and imitative pre-1800 texts and reading practices gave way to a “golden age” of liberty, invention, and imagination that continues to this day. To further investigate and complicate the progressive narratives that are often told about both children’s literature and American literature (two areas of study that I thus understand to be intimately connected), I have considered historical evidence and theoretical discourse surrounding the material reading practices of children, an approach that Victor Watson claims has been “badly needed” in
children’s literature studies. I have learned that children’s books encouraged young people to read independently and expressively as early as the beginning date of my study (1700), and to conform as late as the antebellum period (and, certainly, into the twenty-first century). The large number of literary efforts targeting child readers suggests that young people’s role in the development of American literary culture was considerable and multi-faceted—hardly limited to making the way for the nineteenth-century “Golden Age” of children’s literature or for the ascendancy of an “adult” literary canon.

An important finding, which points to this more complicated understanding of the function of child readership in America, is that early children’s books figured centrally in the formation of American literature and reading practices in general, as well as in the establishment of a book market. From the late seventeenth century, books for children, such as catechisms and primers, gained a wider circulation than many other books, often forming the only contact that common readers (especially those living away from cities) had with literary, and even civic, culture. In his 1810 history of printing in America, Isaiah Thomas notes that before the Revolution an edition of most books might consist of about 500 copies, while children’s primers and spelling books might be printed in editions of 5,000, 10,000, 15,000, and 20,000. Children’s story books, such as James Janeway and Cotton Mather’s A Token for Children (1700), were what David D. Hall calls “steady sellers” or widely circulated books that had a long shelf life among the reading public. During and after the revolution, the children’s book market expanded with the introduction of John Newbery’s playbooks, such as The History of Goody Two Shoes (1765, 1st American edition 1775), many of which Thomas printed and marketed.
These books regularly appeared in booksellers’ advertisements and inventories, and there is evidence that the circulation of children’s books was likely even larger than booksellers’ lists indicate, as people took it for granted that they would be available. The centrality of children’s books suggests not only that these books taught American readers how to read, but also the possibility that the foremost “American reader” was, quite literally as well as imaginatively, a child, a detail that made the frequent metaphorical references to American citizens as child readers all the more powerful.

The child reader’s sphere was not limited to books that have traditionally been defined as “children’s literature.” As Watson argues, children have always read books that confound critics’ expectations of what is “appropriate” for young readers. But the American literary tradition is especially rife with examples of major literary works addressed to or otherwise associated with children. For instance, early American novels, considered by recent scholars to represent “adult” female readership, were explicitly addressed to adolescent girls—Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* (1794) claims “dear girls” as its “true” audience, Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s *Hope Leslie* (1827) refers to “misses in their teens,” and the preface of Rowson’s *Reuben and Rachel* (1798) positions the book as the precursor for an educational series for children around eight or ten. Novels, of course, had multiple readerships, but my project takes seriously the claim—made by authors themselves—that those on the verge of adulthood were the ideal readers of these texts, demonstrating the ways in which novels construct readership and citizenship as a childish endeavor.

As Goodrich’s association of children with the reading public suggests, children came by the nineteenth century to be linked with American literature as a whole, a
phenomenon indicated by extensive overlaps between adult’s and children’s literature. While both American and English publishers had long sold children’s versions of English novels, including Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* (1747) and Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), the miniaturization of English texts did not seem to create the fear that English literature and its populace were “childlike” (despite Virginia Woolf’s later tongue-in-cheek comment that *Middlemarch* was the only English novel for “grown-up people”). Instead, it was American books such as Cooper’s Leatherstocking tales (1823-1841), Irving’s *The Sketch Book* (1820), Maria Susan Cummins’ *The Lamplighter* (1854), Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), and Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) that became lumped in with children’s books, contributing to larger anxieties that the nation’s “infant” status had spawned an “infantile” national literature and reading populace. The label of American texts as “juvenile” was not without basis, as many of the most popular texts featured child characters and targeted child audiences. An 1853 review of *The Wide, Wide World*, for instance, proclaims that the text was first read by children, who only later initiated other readers, such as adult women: “As far as we know the early history of *The Wide, Wide World*, it was, for some time, bought to be presented to nice little girls . . . Elder sisters were soon poring over the volumes, and it was very natural that mothers next should try the spell.”

Children were not only numbered among the reading public but also associated with it. Writing books that would sell often meant writing for an audience that included, or was composed of, young readers. Nathaniel Hawthorne, who was a ghost writer for Peter Parley’s *Universal History* (1837) and wrote several children’s books of his own, claimed that he wrote for children primarily for financial reasons. His shrewd sense of the
book market is supported by evidence of the popularity of nineteenth-century children’s texts; for instance, one of the highest circulating magazines in the antebellum era was *The Youth’s Companion*, which began in 1827 and by 1885 had more readers than any other U.S. magazine. This association between children and the reading public created a phenomenon that one critic referred to as “Typee disorder,” an “affliction” named after Herman Melville’s book that was considered to have affected both young boys and women. The “disease” was described as childlike, maniacal love for books, and its association with one of the staple authors of the nineteenth-century “adult” canon suggests not only that no firm boundary between child and adult readers existed, but that American literature was associated with a childish *appetite* for books. Readers were considered eager, unsophisticated, and impressionable, a trait that also extended to descriptions of American citizens.

The attribution of childlike behavior to all Americans hints at a larger aim of my work, which points to the ultimate blurring between the categories of child and adult in American literature and citizenship. These indistinct age categories effect a further blurring of boundaries—between private feelings and “public” political participation, and between a politics based on freedom and one based on submission. In the course of researching the material practices surrounding children’s reading, I have discovered that the reading child has just as often been used as a symbol or icon—not only as a representative of the reading public, but also for practices, processes, and *ways* of reading, specifically those associated with the *intersections* of individuation and social allegiance, freedom and subjection, that were so central to American citizenship. As a figure for citizenship, the child reader often represents a process by which the
development of individual identity (understood as personal, private, emotional, and unregulated) is also the development of publicly-oriented social, cultural, and political obligation. The modes of reading associated with children most frequently require an act of integration, arranging loyalties to self and society in the reader’s consciousness so they are not diametrically opposed, but intricately related. While this integration begins in childhood, it is ultimately meant to be repeatedly practiced by readers of all ages, creating the ideal citizen and reader as always a “childish” one.

The meaning of the comparison between American citizens and child readers hinges not only on what children read, but on what it means to read like a child—an issue that has been in constant negotiation among children’s authors, pedagogues, and critics. Children’s reading has often been assumed to be primarily passive, represented most strongly by the image of the child being read to by an adult. Alan Richardson writes:

The role which children’s narrative sets up for the reader is above all simple and circumscribed, the reader like the text is stable, stereotyped, linguistically naïve, and constrained. The child reader, like the children’s text, is integral and innocent.14

Children’s role as passive receptors of texts speaks powerfully to their role in the process of creating identities that are inherently subjected to social rules and norms. Karen Sánchez-Eppler observes that the reading child represents “the strongest exemplar of how reading might shape identity and character, precisely because children are viewed as least able to evaluate or resist” what they read.15 Yet this quality of being passively “written upon” by texts is accompanied by multiple activities that children are meant to perform as readers, including loving, writing back to, and even eating their books. I suggest that “active” freedom and “passive” subjection are meant to coalesce in the child reader,
providing a model for how these concepts also intersect in the modern citizen. In doing so, I extend Levander’s and Singley’s claim that the child is a compelling interpretive site “because it is so vulnerable to competing, even opposing claims,” by noting the ways in which the child actually serves to manage and unite oppositions. In part, the child was inscribed as the model of the ideal American reader and citizen because children’s affections could be easily manipulated to support their subjection. But child readers have also represented freedom and even rebellious dissent, both seemingly desirable but often elusive features of citizenship. Ultimately, children’s reading cannot be easily associated with either category, but rather comprises a complex intermingling of freedom and subjection, reinforcing the inextricable relation of these terms in the American imagination.

Children’s ability to merge freedom and subjection was a major factor in the establishment of children’s reading as a constitutive part of (and model for) American citizenship. The nation’s founders considered literacy education to be indispensable to American democracy for this very reason. For instance, Benjamin Rush, educator and signer of the Declaration of Independence, argued that learning to read was “favorable to liberty.” What Rush meant was not that reading would lead to revolution against tyranny, but that a literate populace would be more virtuous, thus requiring less constraint on the part of government. Rush’s particular link between children’s literacy and the freedom of all citizens can be traced to John Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government* (1690) and *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1692)—texts that were influential in the new nation. Locke’s basic theory was that citizens were born as unequal children but with the potential for free adulthood. Freedom was achieved by attaining reason, which
would lead them to consent to law. The Lockean political model thus relied on the circulation of two conflicting narratives: one in which subjected children grow up to be free citizens and one in which both child and citizen remain fundamentally subjected, first to parents and then to law. Locke realized as Rush did that children’s reading was integral to making these two narratives reconcilable in practice. Through education, children would gather the skills to make informed and free choices, while simultaneously learning, through habit, to accept submission voluntarily. Locke’s suggestion that children must be taught to read when they “thought they were only playing” (often cited as a key innovation in children’s literature) was not merely a clever means to teach literacy, but a way of implementing a political system that equated learned subjection with freedom. This political slight-of-hand was distilled into an educational imperative that children learn to “love their books,” a phrase that appeared frequently in American primers and playbooks.

Even so, childhood was never an easily accepted part of American identity, precisely because the association of citizenship with childhood had the side effect of making the citizen’s subjection all too apparent. As of the eighteenth century, children were rejected as participants in the democratic model of citizenship and in the increasingly “sophisticated” culture of readers, even as they simultaneously came to represent the proper feelings, actions, and practices of ideal readers and citizens. As Holly Brewer notes,

In the emerging consent-based political ideology, age played the role that birth status had formerly played in power allocation: the new political theory by definition disqualified those under specific ages from exercising public and even private consent.18
The idea that the citizen’s rational consent was necessary for political participation, and for responsible reading, seems to automatically locate children in a marginal position of pre-citizenship—or in literary terms, in illiteracy or bad reading. Children’s literacy posed complications as a means of building a “free” nation, because child readers (almost by definition) could not be trusted to maintain appropriate practices without considerable constraint. Critics feared that children might somehow be seduced by the wrong books, or worse, might they use their love of their reading to challenge the wishes of their superiors. A cautionary tale from the steady-selling *A Token for Children* tells the story of a young boy who loves to read but who develops strained eyesight. His parents warn him to stop, but he continues to read excessively and eventually goes blind. While the “book love” promoted by Locke and Rush admitted no difference between submission to one’s books and political freedom, or between reading like a child and reading like a citizen, the bad child reader threatened to wrench these associations apart by creating modes of childish submission and of rebellious freedom that had to be curtailed. As a result, literacy and citizenship had to be nominally reconnected with the moral path to rational adulthood, even if childish subjection remained a desirable political goal.

As a result of this double function of the child (as both fundamental, pure citizen and marginal other), children’s centrality to the imagination of American readership and citizenship was often buried or denied. Parley’s comparison, which ultimately leaves it uncertain as to whether he is equating “the public” with children or dismissing them to the less politically-charged “world of children,” points to this oscillation of children in the cultural imagination of readership and citizenship. While children were integral to the ways in which citizens and their consent to government were understood—to the point
that they had an uncanny way of appearing in seemingly “adult” political texts and situations, their centrality was always a point of tension, something that had to be underplayed, denied, or de-politicized in order to ease the culture’s anxieties that their “infant colony” had not come of age, but had instead given way to a nation of constrained, childish adults.

The visibility of subjection in the child reader was compounded by America’s puerile reputation, which took particular shape in a pervasive metaphor of the nation as politically and culturally “small.” This trope can be traced to naturalists such as George Louis Leclerc de Buffon and Abbe Reynal, who wrote about the dwarfing, not only of the natural plants and races associated with America, but of transplanted citizens and their progeny. This shrinking of the American populace, which accompanied the European appellation of the colonies as “infant,” raised the stakes for the development of American youth. By creating narratives in which American children grew up to be free adult citizens, settlers could make the counterclaim that the New World could indeed produce, as J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur put it, “strong vegetative embryos.” The foundational plot of the early American novel—the bildungsroman—supported this seeming eradication of America’s childishness by narrating a “coming of age” tale and by acting as a corrective to childish, irrational reading. But early novels also called the adulthood of the nation and its citizens into question by addressing all readers as “the youth of Columbia” and, more ominously, by meditating frequently on childhood death, a popular literary trope that indexed fears of a citizenship with no potential for adulthood.

The nineteenth-century emergence of a national literature would also come to employ “coming of age” narratives that simultaneously dismissed and highlighted the
child’s part in the story of American literature and citizenship. In an 1898 schoolbook adaptation of Washington Irving’s *The Sketch-Book* (1820), Homer B. Sprague argues that Irving is one of the “chief founders of American literature,” in part because he escaped the fate of “the scholarly men” of the early colonies, who were too busy “rearing the walls of the new temple of liberty” to produce a national literature. Sprague’s argument that no early American literature existed has, of course, been disproved by the critical recovery of hundreds of works produced in America before Irving. Implicit in his statement is an argument that the works of literature that did emerge in the early republic were childish, constraining, unimaginative, and imitative, perhaps because many of them actually were directed to children.

By dismissing the early “childish” works in favor of Irving, Sprague aligns himself with nineteenth-century authors such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Melville, and Hawthorne, who sought to create a “new” American literature by ranking children’s literature as low on the list of worthy literary endeavors. Melville, for instance, used the concept of children’s literature to elevate Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown” above popular children’s works such as *The History of Little Goody Two Shoes* (1766). As readers, children were considered incompetent, unreflective, and conformist—an undeserving audience for literary greatness. This problem of America’s child readership was further compounded by the increased visibility of the plight of African slaves, who were associated with “ignorant and illiterate children” in patriarchal justifications of slavery. Borrowing the logic of these rationalizations without necessarily supporting their ends, Emerson and Thoreau reasoned that being a child and bad reader
was a condition in which one could be enslaved to unjust social restraints, suggesting that the reader’s maturation was more crucial than ever.

Yet, Sprague was himself writing for child readers; his edited version of *The Sketch-Book* was meant for the use of schoolchildren—a fact that hints at the child reader’s continued importance to American literary self-imagining. In its inclusion of comprehension questions and marginal summaries, Sprague’s work bears the marks of basic literacy efforts that were used to socialize children and “childish” readers such as slaves and the poor, demonstrating that these groups were influential to, rather than at odds with, nineteenth-century modes of reading the canon. In addition, Sprague explains Irving’s greatness precisely in terms of childhood by giving a detailed account of the author’s birth, which coincided roughly with the birth of the nation. For Sprague, it was Irving’s status as a republican child—his infancy mirroring that of the nation itself—that allowed him to forge a “new” national literature. Sprague’s goes on to depict American literature as a veritable children’s affair by giving an entire genealogy that focuses on when its authors were born in relation to Irving. In doing so, Sprague demonstrates the ways in which what was later labeled the American Renaissance was also a reclaiming of childishness. Recounting American literature’s “rebirth,” D.H. Lawrence famously declared, “[America] starts old, old, wrinkled and writhing in an old skin. And there is a gradual sloughing off of the old skin, toward a new youth. It is the myth of America.” R.W.B. Lewis has similarly argued that “the image contrived to embody the most fruitful contemporary ideas was that of the authentic American as a figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a new history.” In the work of nineteenth-century writers, the child was imagined as a way to restart American history and to
transcend social, political, and literary conformity. In this way, American literature’s attempt to “grow up” once and for all required new childishness—a sign that freedom and subjection would continue to be negotiated through the figure of the child reader.

By using the child reader to trace these large patterns, shifts, and trends in the American literary imagination of readership and citizenship, my project combines a historical inquiry with a much-needed textual analysis of the ways in which children are imagined in both major and marginal American texts. Children’s literature, especially within American studies, has until recently been characterized primarily by bibliographic studies that position children’s books as curiosities or as historical artifacts. Even though American children’s literature is increasingly understood as being worthy of serious study, with book length works by Sánchez-Eppler and Patricia A. Crain, there are still surprisingly few literary analyses of the texts that children read. This endeavor is, of course, complicated by the blurring between American literature and children’s literature that I have discussed, a blurring that is integral to the meanings of childhood in the U.S. Thus, instead of giving a bibliographic account of children’s literature, a strictly archival account of children’s reading, or a history of the children’s book market, I have chosen to offer detailed readings of representative texts, such as James Janeway and Cotton Mather’s *A Token for the Children of New England* (1700) and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *A Wonder Book for Boys and Girls* (1851), as a way to map larger social, historical, and cultural shifts in how and what children read, as well as the changes and patterns in the cultural meanings of children’s reading. I have combined my readings of texts with historical evidence surrounding children’s education and reading practices. The child
reader, I suggest, is often a model of how theoretical ideas about childhood and citizenship can take on material expression. For instance, the child is at the center of the Locke’s narratives about the citizen’s consent to government, but, as Locke’s participation in both political and pedagogical efforts shows us, his theories do not end as intellectual exercises, but engender narratives that the child, through reading, is meant to internalize and enact. Of course, I have also been careful to highlight of the ways in which the child reader can also represent a disconnection between theoretical ideas of childhood and lived experience—a phenomenon that demonstrates the always tenuous relationship between books and their readers.

My project is organized chronologically so as to follow the development of the child reader’s role across four historical shifts in the imagination of American citizenship, which correspond to the Puritan era, the early national period, the period of the French Revolution, and the American Renaissance. Chapter one, “‘How Art Thou Affected, Poor Child, in the Reading of this Book?’: Puritan Children’s Literature, the Catechism, and Closet Readership,” traces the appearance of the child reader in Puritan sermons and children’s texts, including Mather’s The Religion of the Closet (1705), Janeway and Mather’s A Token for Children, and the best-selling children’s reading textbook, The New England Primer (1686-1836). I argue that Mather’s charge for children to “run into the closet” to read, as well as Puritan laws requiring that all children learn to read at home, established new links between children’s reading practices, domestic spaces, and the social and legal obligations of citizenship. In particular, Mather’s expectation that the child reader will exhibit an excess of feeling in the closet—a demand echoed by Janeway in his preface to the readers of Token—defines children’s piously sentimental response to
their books as a civic duty. While the idea of “the closet” at first appears to encourage authentically personal reading experiences by shielding the child’s emotions from public view, I suggest that it primarily works to create the reader’s “authentic” subjectivity and emotion as inherently disciplined and contained within a diminutive (child-sized) sphere of expression.

In chapter two, “‘Learn to Love Your Book:’ Eighteenth-Century Playbooks and Affectionate Citizenship,” I trace the significance of the child reader’s emotional responses to her books through major shifts in the paradigms of readership and citizenship, in which readers were imagined as free consumers within the emerging book market and citizens were redefined as consenting participants in their own governance. While these shifts relied upon a rejection of the patriarchal claim that all citizens were children, I argue that political thinker and pedagogue John Locke established new parallels between children’s love for their books and citizens’ “loving” sacrifice of their liberty for the good of the commonwealth. This model of “affectionate” citizenship defined political freedom in terms of personal and emotional relationships, rather than through civic acts, and located its modus operandi within the child and woman-centered domestic and educational spheres. As I demonstrate, the crucial links between the personal and political were forged by children’s books such as The Renowned History of Giles Gingerbread (1765), Sarah Fielding’s The Governess (1749, 1st American edition, 1786), and Hannah Webster Foster’s The Boarding School (1798), which trained child readers to transfer their love from their parents and books to the state. Affectionate citizenship, I claim, ultimately enables constraints within the citizen’s freedom,
producing what Lauren Berlant has termed the “infantile citizen,” a figure whose feelings and reading practices embody citizenship but who has no real rights.

Chapter three, “Readers Who Love Too Much: The Early American Novel and the Childish Citizen,” considers another crucial historical moment in the articulation of American readership and citizenship: the period during and directly following the French Revolution. In the shadow of the French terror and concerns about similar unrest at home, Americans became preoccupied with delineating citizenship’s limits, a project that required new roles for child readers, as well as a new literary genre: the novel. Children began to appear as “bad” readers, whose vulnerability to narrative seduction highlighted the incapacities and rebellious propensities that disqualified certain persons from free citizenship. The early American novel, explicitly dedicated to these “childish” readers, emerged as an attempt to regulate the boundaries between subjected childhood and adult freedom by educating the child reader to avoid “bad” books and to “grow up.” Nonetheless, as I demonstrate in my analysis of William Hill Brown’s *The Power of Sympathy* (1789), Tabitha Gilman Tenney’s *Female Quixotism* (1801) and Leonora Sansay’s *Laura* (1809), this endeavor was complicated by a competing cultural desire for the citizen’s perpetual “childishness,” which blurred the distinction between child and adult readers and found expression in the novel’s motifs of dead babies and “adult child” characters. I conclude this chapter with a reading of Irving’s “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” (1820), in which I argue that Irving’s parody of the bad reader narrative openly ventures skepticism about the American reader’s ability to become an adult.

In chapter four, “‘Nothing but Baby Faces’: The American Renaissance and the Natural Child Reader,” I investigate the child reader’s role in the mid-nineteenth century,
a period which was seen as both a coming of age and a rebirth for American literature itself. In light of this double conception of the “maturity” (or lack thereof) of American literary efforts, a single image of childhood was no longer able to embody freedom and subjection, requiring a veritable splitting of the child reader into two dominant images. Emerson and Thoreau used the metaphor of Americans as bad child readers (and, particularly, as readers of the spelling book) to reject a conformist social model, and simultaneously re-imagined the child as the catalyst for a new paradigm shift in the American politics of readership. The new childish citizenship is a “natural” one, in which citizens are unified in their readings of nature without the need for submission to books or laws. But, while Emerson perceives childhood as a way to elude consent, he retains the Lockean goal of incorporating all readers into one voice, making the child easily appropriable as a figure of assimilation. Sentimental authors, in addition, located children in a “natural” sphere, but assigned to them the regulatory role of disciplining and domesticating both adults and other children, including slave boys and girls. In The Scarlet Letter (1850) and A Wonder Book for Boys and Girls (1851), Hawthorne anticipates the sentimental by granting “natural” children a disciplinary role, while Harriet Beecher Stowe pairs the natural child with the enslaved child reader “at risk,” who beckons adult citizens to protect and re-assimilate her through literacy education. The notion that children can regulate citizenship from the outside, while in many ways retaining their status as the ideal citizens, represents a significant shift from the image of the closet child reader, one that anticipates the appeals for protection that have characterized children’s relationship with the political and, indeed, with literary texts into the twenty-first century.
I end my study with the hope that other scholars will join me in exploring the significance of child readers in American literature and culture. The fear of childishness has unfortunately been a lasting legacy of the nineteenth-century. As Beverly Lyon Clark observes, “the nation’s emergence as a world power in the twentieth century was marked by a desire to put away childish things.” Clark argues that this “putting away of childish things” has found its way into literary criticism as well—only very recently are scholars “entering a new phase” in which “the academy may be becoming more willing to take children’s literature seriously again.” New scholarship on American childhood is important to understand, among other things, the ways in which subjection and freedom continue to act in concert in the national imagination. As scholars such as Berlant have argued, the child has remained a powerful figure for creating, enforcing, and contesting particular modes of citizenship. By insisting upon the child’s importance to the formation of American readers and citizens, my work hopes to lead to a greater understanding of the ways in which childishness functions both in America’s history and in its present.
CHAPTER 1

‘HOW ART THOU AFFECTED, POOR CHILD, IN THE READING OF THIS BOOK?’: PURITAN CHILDREN’S LITERATURE, THE CATECHISM, AND CLOSET READERSHIP

In his depiction of Puritan culture in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Nathaniel Hawthorne attributes great power to language as a disciplinary tool, a possibility that has its roots in the seventeenth-century rise of print culture. By choosing the letter “A,” he links this power to the basic building blocks of literacy itself and, fittingly, grants the central role of reading the text’s major symbol to a child, Hester’s impish daughter Pearl. As a child and reader, Pearl exhibits a curious intermingling of freedom and submission, a trait that situates her within a long history of the fluctuation of these concepts around the figure of the reading child. One scene in particular, Pearl’s catechism session at the governor’s house, references a practice that, in the Puritan era, was the subject of much discussion in these very terms. As catechizing was a long-practiced ritual of subjugation, Puritan leaders debated how to reconcile its social benefits with emerging notions of individual piety and personal interpretation of texts. Pearl’s catechizing highlights the difficulties of coming to a tenable resolution: while the child “could have borne a fair
examination in the New England Primer, or the first column of the Westminster
Catechisms” and therefore has the knowledge to subjugate herself properly, submissive
reading is at odds with her imaginative whims. When Reverend Wilson asks her the
familiar catechism question, “who made you?” she replies with the incorrect, but
literarily sophisticated, answer that she was plucked from a rose bush. Wilson’s shocked
reaction reveals that for him catechism questions, even about one’s very selfhood, were
not meant to be answered from individual imagination or experience, but by the book.
Yet, Puritan leaders were interested precisely in how these two levels of knowing might
cohere, how subjectivity itself might come to be written through practices such as
catechizing.

Ultimately, Pearl acts as example of how this might happen; she becomes the
text’s most privileged reader of the alphabetic character her mother wears, a reading that
proves her identity to be part and parcel with Puritan discipline. A miniature “A” herself,
“the scarlet letter endowed with life,” Pearl represents a merging of selfhood and social
order through language. The letter is simultaneously a community symbol (as Pearl
notes, “from the hornbook”) and an icon of personal and familial identity, the first thing
she sees as an infant. Her reading of the “A” in the forest, which proclaims that the letter
is the reason why the minister keeps his hand over his heart, requires imagination,
creativity, and symbolic understanding. But her interpretation is also strikingly orthodox
in its effects. She wishes for Dimmesdale to show his letter for all of the community to
see and will not allow Hester to discard her letter or evade the judgment it represents.
Through Pearl, Hawthorne reveals a keen understanding of the function of childhood
literacy in America, the history of which I begin to outline in this chapter. The
“perfection of ideal impishness,” as one nineteenth-century review called her, Pearl manages to merge both individual freedom and subjection to social norms in her reading practices, demonstrating the child’s ability to both expand and police the boundaries of acceptable interpretation and expression. In her insistence that Hester and Dimmesdale align their private selves with their public postures, she makes the case that private, individual feeling and submission to community norms need not (and indeed must not) be at odds.

As Pearl teaches us, children’s reading does not comprise a singular act of either freedom or subjection. The child, as reader, negotiates a complex matrix of literacy practices that are simultaneously imagined as liberating and indoctrinating, solitary and communicative, privately experienced and culturally shaped. While literary historians have tended to polarize children’s reading into two categories, the catechistic, indoctrinating children’s reading of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the permissive, solitary reading of the later “golden age” of children’s literature, the tension between free and submissive models of readership cannot be so easily organized on a time line. Neither can forms of reading such as catechizing and silent reading be easily deemed strictly repressive or liberating. Instead, as I argue in this chapter, freedom and subjection emerge as two mutually dependent ideals that become intricately related through childhood literacy. It is children’s ability to represent and integrate these seemingly contradictory values that makes them such powerful models for emerging concepts of American readership and citizenship.

In what follows, I explain the historical circumstances through which the child reader came to be a major figure in colonial New England and then turn my attention to
the ways in which individual freedom and subjection become particularly inseparable in
the primary texts and theoretical discussions surrounding two sets of reading practices
associated with children: catechizing and “closet” reading. The first was a longstanding
public church ritual that had become suspect in the face of new concerns about individual
identity. Authors feared that readers could simply “parrot” or memorize lessons without
“taking them to heart” or allowing them to shape their interior selves. As a result, what
had been understood as an activity primarily for the public enforcement and expression of
patriarchal power had to transform into a venue of at least apparent individual expression.
The second set of practices, the literacy activities of the closet, reflected a new
understanding of reading as a solitary endeavor that could be enjoyed by individual
family members in private spaces. While the idea of “the closet” created a space for the
individual to escape or transcend the hierarchies of patriarchal culture, closet practices
ultimately construct this individual freedom as inherently constrained, compatible with
these same hierarchies.

Child Readers and Late Seventeenth-Century Spiritual, Civic, and Literary Culture

The complicated relationship between freedom and subjection in social
governance was, at this historical moment, beginning to be forged. New England
governance stemmed from patriarchalism, a set of political ideas in which the child
already operated as a crucial metaphor for the citizen and subject. Befitting this
understanding of the governor as parent, clergymen authors interpreted the fifth
commandment, which demanded absolute obedience to one’s mother and father, to speak
also for spiritual and civic government. Under this rule, all civic subjects were forever
“children,” occupying their places in a heaven-ordained civic family. But by the late seventeenth-century, Puritan religious and civic culture located increasing value in the experience and participation of the common individual, a shift that stemmed from Protestant theology and attributed greater autonomy to both child and citizen.

Protestants believed that each believer was personally responsible for his or her salvation, and that there should be little mediation between the individual believer and the word of God. Theologians hotly debated how this belief might apply to children, who, in a strictly patriarchal system, were thought to inherit the beliefs and political loyalties of their parents. Though some Puritan writers argued that children’s souls were partially the responsibility of their parents, most agreed that parents’ liability was limited. Cotton Mather argues that only infants are saved by the faith of their parents, while other writers, such as Jonathan Edwards, refused to guarantee elect status even to children who died in infancy, further emphasizing children’s responsibility for their own souls. The shift in spiritual responsibility had implications for community and political membership; children could no longer be assumed to be automatic members of the church and society, but rather not-yet-citizens whose loyalties could presumably change. While children did not have the literal power to vote, their choices could determine the future of the community. As a result, considerable stakes were invested in the education of the individual child, as indicated by an increasing number of sermons, laws, and books devoted to child-rearing as a civic duty.

The heightened attention to children suggests that, rather than a radical break from patriarchalism, the shift to a politics based on individual responsibility meant absorption of the metaphorical stakes already assigned to filial piety into an increased
focus on childhood as the origin of both personal development and social membership. The imagination of the citizen as something like a child thus was not abandoned in this transition, but gained social and symbolic weight. Because childhood was literally understood as the period in which selfhood and community loyalty would be formed, children’s education attained special religious and political status. Individuality had to be shaped, from the earliest moments of infancy, so that it was compatible with traditional structures of power—perhaps one of the reasons why patriarchy with a small ‘p’ (the political dominance of older white males) did not disappear even as the traditional theory of patriarchal governance was beginning to lose dominance. But further, child readers and their books continued to provide a venue for leaders to work out the formula for the governance of all citizens, who, in turn, continued to be imagined as childlike. Childhood became a particularly effective site for the larger project of merging patriarchal social expectations with the new focus on individuality, creating a fundamental link between autonomy, hierarchy, and social control. For the individual citizen, the process of shaping one’s identity to fit community hierarchies was ongoing, and because childhood was the most intensive site of self-fashioning, it became a way to conceptualize the process in general, lending metaphors and images even to those who had moved beyond the chronological boundaries of youth as we now define them.

If childhood was the site for the union of patriarchal subjection and individual freedom, children’s literacy was the technology and set of practices through which it would become ingrained in everyday existence. The spread of literacy and the rise of print culture occurred concomitantly with the process of redefining childhood and citizenship, and these related events contributed mutually to each other. Increased literacy
created new readers and new categories of readership, while the change in the status of children required new approaches to and markets for reading materials. As a result of the focus on individual spiritual responsibility, the promotion of children’s reading became for religious leaders a key spiritual and civic priority. The best way to know God was by reading the Bible, making it imperative not only that children have access to Bibles at home, but that they have the ability to read and understand them. Because spiritual growth led to community membership, the characteristics that made for the best believer were also those that made the best citizen. Mather argues that the reading child is, in many ways, the ideal political subject: “I must Exceedingly Strengthen the Idea How Reasonable and Honourable a Thing it is, to make a Present of Well-Educated Children unto the common-wealth.”

The blending of spiritual and civic imperatives was institutionalized through the seventeenth-century establishment of literacy laws, which were one of the first ways that children (and readers) appeared in civic and legal discourse. A 1642 law in Massachusetts gave the selectmen of each village the power to inspect households to make sure that children were being taught to read and that they were being catechized. In addition, masters of apprentices were required, first by individual indentures and in 1703 by law, to teach children to read. In 1647, another law required that towns with more than 50 households appoint someone to teach their children to read, and that those with more than 100 households establish a grammar school. Basic literacy was considered so significant that even female children, who were schooled at home or at the less equipped “dame schools,” and who had no need to learn to write, were expected to gain proficiency at reading. Learning to read was intimately related to following the rules of society, a
citizenly duty in which women and children could take part without having legal rights. An elaboration of the literacy laws in 1648 required that parents teach “knowledge of the capital lawes: upon penaltie of twenty shillings for each neglect therein” and that even child servants should be catechized at least once a week. The “capital” laws were those laws that were common to both the Bible and the state. The catechism, in addition to being the most important reading material for children, explained that allegiance to parental, religious and state authorities were required under the fifth commandment.

The establishment of literacy laws highlights the ways in which individual subjectivity and submission to community norms became fundamentally linked through the practices and institutions surrounding literacy. While the laws inscribed the functions and boundaries of the private individual and household, they simultaneously allowed for the penetration of that private space by the state. The literacy laws prefigured later poor laws that would allow state intervention in the care of children. In 1673, Salem selectmen found several families in violation of the literacy laws and considered apprenticing the children to other families. Children’s reading acted not only as a reason for state intervention but also as a model for it, in the sense that children’s books were a technology through which religious leaders and lawmakers could enter and regulate the individual’s private space.

The crucial connection between literacy and subjectivity that allowed authors simultaneously to license and constrain their readers derived philosophically from the notion of the mind as a tabula rasa. The image, meaning “blank slate,” was as ancient as Aristotle, but explored heavily by Puritan writers and later popularized by John Locke. It was initially attractive to the Puritans because Aristotle’s understanding of this concept...
matched the patriarchal notion of infant depravity, in which the child is plagued by sin from birth. The philosopher conceives of the mind as a palimpsest-like text, where the bad must be blotted out through discipline before the good can be “written” in its place. Puritan writers, however, were also beginning to reshape the concept of the *tabula rasa*, creating a competing (though often coexisting) understanding of the metaphor. The notion of “writing on the mind” came to signify not only a means of wiping one’s inherited sin, but a means of structuring consciousness itself. Thomas Vincent conceives of the mind as “a fair table, or a white sheet of Paper in which little is written” and orders readers to “not blot and besmear the Paper with the defilements of Lust.” In his understanding of the *tabula rasa*, subjectivity is figured as a blank book upon which acceptable social behaviors can be written. As a result of these ideas, the Puritans were well positioned to conceive of new social functions for reading, including the creation and discipline of readers via text.

As literal texts, books could transfer writing onto the metaphorical text of the mind. Books for children, such as the ones I consider in this chapter, gained particular importance because they encapsulated this process of “writing” a new kind of child, subject, and citizen. Though the printing of children’s reading material was still in its foundational stages in the Puritan era, the reading imperatives for children caused books for young people to dominate the colonies’ small, but growing, market. While David D. Hall has cautioned that it is easy to overstate the prevalence of literary culture in Puritan New England in general, as paper was expensive and only the affluent were able to obtain large libraries, his own evidence on book ownership suggests that the majority of families did come into contact with certain books. In Middlesex County, Massachusetts, two
thirds of homes owned the Bible and 60 percent had a few other books. Hall says that “most persons had the use of, or owned, a Bible, psalmbook, primer and catechism.” The latter two books were often explicitly addressed to child readers. Catechisms taught basic religious lessons, while primers combined ABC books, or hornbooks, with religious teachings. Both books explicitly paired the child’s formulation of selfhood with an inculcation of his or her place in the religious and social hierarchy.

The other two books on the list, the Bible and psalmbook were read by adults and children alike, but they were explicitly used as milestones in reading education. A reading curriculum might begin with the primer and catechism and move on to the Psalter, New Testament, and Bible. While also not explicitly directed to children, the most well-known theological works, such as Joseph Alleine’s *Alarm to the Unconverted* (1671), were also likely appropriated by individual child readers. Church leaders and writers frequently recommended adult theological books to children; for example, in *A Little Book for Little Children* (1702), Thomas White tells his readers to read the Bible and *The Plain Man’s Pathway to Heaven* (1601). Several children in *Token* read adult theological works by Richard Baxter. Even without including texts shared between adults and children, texts for children were among the most widely owned books in New England. Based on Hall’s list of books owned by most families, we can conclude that children’s books comprised up to half of the library of the average American household. Even specialized children’s books that were not included on Hall’s list, such as *A Token for Children* (1676, 1st American edition, 1700) and *A Little Book for Little Children* (1660), were considered “steady sellers” and would have been more widely available than many books for adults.
Perhaps even more suggestively, children’s reading can be understood not only in relation to actual material objects with increasing status and circulation, but as a way of reading pioneered by primers, catechisms, and children’s books and then extended into other reading experiences and practices, including those of adults. For instance, while catechisms and ABC books were considered children’s books, they were also read by adults who were considered “children in understanding.” The use of children’s books by adults, and vice versa, suggests that there was a considerable blurring between children’s and adult literature in Puritan culture. The blurring was increased by the material features of New England books. Amory notes that all colonial books were bound in sheep’s leather, which was cheaper and less durable than the typical calf leather used in the English book trade. In England, this cheaper leather was used to bind “small books” for children; thus, all American books would have been difficult to distinguish at first glance from imported English children’s books. The distinction between children’s and adult literature was complicated further by authors’ tendency in both kinds of texts to refer to all readers metaphorically as child readers. As will become clear in this chapter, child readership was not understood solely or even primarily as a literal status, with age boundaries, but as a label for the process and strategy for integrating the formation of identity with one’s integration into the hierarchical social organization.

The ABC and the Catechism

Though catechisms date from the early years of the church, they were, by the seventeenth century, fully embroiled in the period’s patriarchal theories of governance. In content and form, catechizing established parallels between parental, religious, and civic
authority. Much more than a material book, the catechism comprised a reading ritual that happened in multiple public and semi-public spaces, including church, school, and household. Reciting the catechism was understood as a public performance of the child subject’s acceptance of his or her place in the patriarchal hierarchy. The activities of catechism instruction, correction, and punishment allowed ministers, teachers, governors, and parents to work as a multi-lateral force, conveying that children must submit to the wills of their superiors. Yet, at mid-seventeenth-century, the New England literacy laws defined learning and reciting the catechism as a necessary activity of the private individual, signaling a shift in the ways that the practice was conceived. While catechizing had traditionally centered on an act of public deference—leaving little room for consideration of individual beliefs, interpretations, and expressions—there was increasing emphasis on the catechism’s ability to penetrate into the deep recesses of the reader’s interiority, shaping his or her affections, behavior, heart, and mind. As a result, catechumens began to offer at least the appearance of agency and personal expression. By demanding readerly identification with the catechism, catechizing took on a new ability to yoke individual subjectivity with acceptance of the social order.

In this period, the catechism was undergoing gradual but significant changes. The traditional form of catechizing was “formal” drilling, where catechumens were questioned orally by a minister or his assistant. In England, this type of catechizing was especially pervasive because all clergymen were required to catechize children and other “ignorant” people at least once a week for anywhere between 15 minutes and 2 hours.\(^{41}\) As the language used to describe the act of catechizing suggests, children generally played a passive role. Clergymen sometimes even argued that catechizing did not require
that catechumens could read. By contrast, New England Puritans tended to assume that catechizing would be done at home, with the child taking a more active part. In *Cares about the Nurseries* (1702), Mather suggests that catechizing can occur as “table talk” between parents and children. As an indication of the child’s greater responsibility as a participant in this process, catechizing also became increasingly associated with the ability to read and came to include a wide variety of individual and group literacy practices. Reading the catechism might entail practicing answers one-on-one with a parent or other authority figure; reading answers with other children in unison; following along in a printed text while others read answers; reading silently in order to memorize answers for recitation; copying the catechism on paper in order to learn answers; or learning the catechism line-by-line with a tutor. Increasingly, catechizing might also mean reading or listening to an explication of the catechism; reading or reciting the catechism with an eye toward crafting or improvising one’s own answers; or reading the catechism silently as a meditative practice. The wide variety of reading practices signals a greater investment in the child’s role in the catechizing process than that implied by formal catechizing. The increase in the social importance of the individual child’s beliefs and feelings meant that this traditionally public practice had to adapt, taking on the new functions of creating private subjects and integrating them into the community hierarchy. Catechumen had to be simultaneously performing deference consistent with their place in the patriarchal system and expressing their deepest individual convictions as part of a newly self-governing society.

As a result, catechizing came to be understood as a structure and reading strategy that informed the child reader’s contact with reading, writing, and speaking in both public
and private contexts. The very act of learning to read was aligned with learning the
catechism. The literacy laws declared that children be taught to read, not primarily for
benefit of literacy, but so they could be catechized. There were two possible scenarios for
how reading and catechizing might be taught. Children might begin by learning the letters
and syllables, proceeding toward the catechism, or they might learn the catechism orally
and then later use their oral knowledge as a bridge to reading both elementary words and
the catechism. Green indicates that Puritan education in both England and the colonies
probably consisted of a combination of the two, but there is evidence that New England
authority figures often saw catechizing as contingent upon literacy and familiarity with
printed material.\textsuperscript{43} Mather assumes that the first part of catechizing is to give children a
printed text: “First, then, ‘tis to be taken for granted, \textit{O Parents}, that you have put an
agreeable \textit{Catechism} into the Hands of your \textit{Children}, and charged them to get it by
heart.”\textsuperscript{44} The shift from oral to print technology was only partial at this point, and the
catechism provides a specific instance in which to examine writers and authority figures’
concerns and innovations related to the increasing reliance on print. Although William J.
Gilmore argues that New Englanders did not distinguish between oral and print
communication at first, the catechism, as printed text, gradually became understood as
portable and disembodied authority.\textsuperscript{45} Catechizing by rote, where readers were passively
shaped by a controlling authority, was no longer considered wholly sufficient. Writers of
catechisms not only had to make certain that readers could enact public displays of piety,
but also to see that their private experiences of reading conformed to the lessons of the
catechism.
To aid the association between reading and religious orthodoxy, primers, which had traditionally held the catechism and other fundamentals of spiritual belief, were re-envisioned as reading textbooks and were revised to include multiple alphabets, basic words, and practice reading passages. Children at dame schools and grammar schools often learned their ABCs and catechism together, combined into one book.46 The New England Primer (1690), which had an average annual sale of 20,000 for the 150 years that it was printed, also included a catechism, the Westminster Shorter Catechism (first compiled in 1647).47 In addition to this, the primers themselves prepared children to read catechisms in several ways, from their religious content down to the manner in which the alphabet and simple words were presented. For example, the earliest extant edition of The New England Primer begins by presenting children with multiple versions of the alphabet, including the “The Great English Letters” and “The Small English Letters,” which were known to printers as “black letter text.”48 To a modern reader, the presentation of the alphabet four times might seem redundant, but because catechisms were frequently printed in the older, black letter font, the letters served the purpose of introducing the most commonly used catechism script.49 Soon after the first alphabet pages, the primer presents child readers with several “simple” words broken down into lists according to the number of syllables. The word lists are carefully chosen to include several commonly used religious concepts, including God, good, heal, clay, grace, pure, Father, glory, godliness, holiness, benevolence, ceremony, everlasting, fidelity, glorifying, humility, admiration, exhortation, and fornication. Most of these words are used in the Westminster Short Catechism included with the 1727 edition of the primer.
In the remainder of the primer, the alphabet is repeated over and over, conjoined with religious imagery, in order to pin down its potential range of significations for the Puritan reader. As Patricia A. Crain points out in *The Story of A*, the letter, as image, at once has no meaning and carries the potential for multiple meanings. By yoking the alphabet to religious meanings, the primer seeks to provide the child reader with safe, approved significations for its letters and to prevent readers from free associating different meanings for the letters. In one of the most famous parts of the primer, the alphabet is joined with rhyming verses. As Crain has shown, the primer even appropriates secular images, such as pictures resembling popular inn and shop signs of the time, re-associating them with religious lessons. Fifteen out of twenty-six letters in the earliest extant edition (1727) of the primer are associated with religious meanings, and several later primers revised the rhyming alphabet to include all religious images. As if this rhyming alphabet were not enough, the primer reinforces this message by including yet another alphabet, the “alphabet of lessons,” which uses the alphabet as an acrostic to teach religious duties. The most fundamental lesson here seems to be that reading is inseparable from community values and rules. In the very act of learning to read letters, the individual reader begins to write these values onto his or her heart and mind.

Catechism writers did not want readers simply to memorize answers, but to construct their entire identities around its lessons. To do this, children had fully to comprehend what they were learning. Rote memorization was used to teach the catechism, but it was discouraged as an end in itself. Ministers were horrified to find that, when they switched the order of the catechism questions, some catechumens would follow the original order and give perfectly memorized right answers for the wrong
questions. This type of mindless performance became known as “parroting” and was highly discouraged. Mather tells parents, “Be not satisfied with Hearing the Child patter out by Rote the words of the Catechism like Parrots; but be inquisitive how far their Understandings do take in the things of God.” To avoid encouraging children to “parrot,” catechisms had to offer strategies to engage their readers as well as to guide them.

One strategy to engage the reader was the widespread adoption of the question and answer format as the primary catechism design. As a practice, catechizing was not uniquely Puritan, or even uniquely Protestant. In the Middle Ages, Catholics “catechized” by having catechumens memorize church creeds and prayers as “blocks” of text. The Protestants broke from this type of catechizing and gradually introduced the question and answer format. While Puritans argued that they were going back to the traditional type of catechizing that was done in the days of the early church, no evidence proves that this was the case, a sign perhaps that this was a posture that Protestants took to dilute any potentially radical aspects of the innovation. The form creates the appearance of a different power dynamic than the old tradition of memorizing “blocks” of text. Instead of mimicking what is written or spoken by the authority of the church, readers appear to engage in improvisation in answering the question, creating the fiction that readers are answering of their own volition and from their own experience. For example, a popular catechism question asked, “How do we know that there is a God?” The answer, that we know God “through his works,” makes it sound as if children are basing their answer on an experience of the world. Baxter uses this question as an example of how the catechism teaches the child to know and answer through his or her senses and reason.
While the questions seem to ask for children’s actual experience of God, it is unlikely that children’s experience or imagination would have led them to the answers demanded by the catechism, a problem that Hawthorne explores in his depiction of Pearl. As the outrage over Pearl’s unorthodox replies suggests, the question and answer form allows reader improvisation in appearance more than in reality, as answers were often just as fully scripted as were Catholic catechisms. Still, the reader was not supposed merely to “perform” the script; the performance was meant to be internalized, so that answering questions could be a means of uniting Puritan theology with the deepest layers of self. While the dialogue format seems to suggest that the child reader answers alone, or at the very least with other readers, the catechism answers actually combine the “voices” of clergyman author, catechizer, text, reader and presumably even God speaking in unison. By ventriloquizing all of these voices as their own speech, readers legitimize the text’s authority, as well as the authority of the clergyman, lending their own testimony and consent. Depictions of catechumens in death narratives such as Janeway and Mather’s *A Token for Children* attempt to naturalize children’s authoritative answers to the catechism questions by showing pious children answering questions properly “before they could speak plain.” Many of the “wonderful sayings” uttered by death narrative children are in response to catechism-like questions, where parents ask them about their commitment to God and attitude toward death. These children appear to answer the questions spontaneously and naturally, but their scrupulously correct answers end up sounding much like the catechism answers.

It was usually not until after proving that they were capable of giving the scripted response that readers would be asked to improvise and expound upon answers using their
own thoughts. This ensured that their improvisations would fit the general rules set up by the catechism text and would lend further credit to its contents. The ultimate goal was for children to make their identities conform to the catechism text so closely that they could repeat their lessons “without book.” Mather insists that children “consent from their souls to every part of the covenant” and conform their “Affections and Practices” to the catechism.\(^57\) To achieve this end, Mather argues that parents should “contrive all the Charms imaginable, that [children’s] Hearts, and Lives may be Molded into that Form.”\(^58\) Mather’s phrasing here is very telling. It is not enough for children to remember the words or the catechism, or even to act the way the catechism tells them to act. Their hearts and minds, as well as their tongues and bodies, must be affected.

The “form” that children’s identities are to be molded into refers not only to that of the pious Christian reader, but also literally to the form of the catechism, as they begin to adopt its cadences and language into their everyday existence. To ensure that children put the catechism into practice, parents were advised to use catechism-type language: “And, my Child, is it not a bad thing to be a sinner? Should not you seek above all things to be saved from your sin?”\(^59\) Children, answering back, are meant to construct their identities so that they might give the right answers, which are embedded in the questions themselves. Mather also encourages readers to use the format of the catechism for self-examination. He even goes so far as to voice the questions himself, in what he imagines to be the reader’s own voice: “If GOD should now take me away by Death, what would become of me after Death, and throughout Eternal Ages? Am I ready?”\(^60\) Given Mather’s prodding, it would not have taken much for the reader to realize that the correct answer to the second question was “yes” (or that if it wasn’t, that one had better strive to make it
so). Catechizing appears here as a technique of developing and exploring subjectivity, but it also is a means of constructing that subjectivity to conform to the official catechism lessons and reinforcing that conformity through constant repetition.

This process of forging one’s individuality around the catechism was not limited to childhood. Though children’s pious expressions were particularly valued, catechizing was an activity in which readers of all ages could take part. To emphasize the childlike task of merging identity and subjection, catechisms converted all readers metaphorically into child readers. Texts were addressed to “children in age and children in understanding,” “children in years or in knowledge,” “children in Christ,” “novices in the school of Christ,” “babes in Christ,” and “babes in knowledge.” Subordinates, such as women and servants, were especially considered to be in the category of “children in understanding”; Mather argues that masters should catechize servants because they are “a sort of Parents to them.” In his Explicatory Catechism (1673), Vincent also refers to all readers as children:

I am strongly obliged to deall the service I can for your souls . . . but the chief obligation of all is the near relation between us, when I can write to you, not as my hearers only but to many of you as my children . . . My endeavors are (as a father to his children) to feed you with knowledge and understanding.

Catechizing, Mather explains, is akin to nursing: “We are call’d, the Nurses of Souls, and we must have Milk for them, in Catechising . . . O, take all opportunities, that they may as it were suck in Religion, with their Mother’s Milk from you.” This metaphor was not unique to Mather, as catechism titles such as John Cotton’s Spiritual Milk for Boston Babes (1646) and Clement Ellis’s The Lambs of Christ Fed with the Sincere Milk of the
*Word* (1692) suggest. Mather emphasizes that milk builds the child’s body, while catechizing molds the heart and soul.

The nursing metaphor implies that readers will be “weaned” after they have constructed their identities, bodies, and minds to the shape of the catechism. In *Cares about the Nurseries*, Mather locates the transition from childhood to adulthood at the time when children are finished saying the catechism and can teach it themselves:

But come and make an open profession of your Christianity, and pass from your Infant-state into your Adult State . . . Let it now be seen that you understand your true interests; you are coming to write yourselves men and women.⁶⁴

Mather’s language of “writing” oneself into an adult is significant, though it would have been more accurate to say that one becomes an adult by being “written upon” by the catechism; adulthood was not a process of inevitable growth, but the result of becoming literate and conversant in the language of religious selfhood. Mather makes it clear that readers “are always at most but Minors in Christianity” until they have learned the catechism in full and expressed their adherence to its lessons.⁶⁵ The notion that one “writes” oneself into a dutiful citizen and subject shows the extent to which submission to patriarchal power has become inseparable from the exercise of individual autonomy. “Adulthood” did not mean an end to subjugation, and even parents retained a deferential place in the hierarchy:

Now I will add this one small consideration to the rest; You will certainly find your Families the more Tractable, and Orderly, and Obedient for your Catechising of them. The more you do your Duty to them, the more Dutiful they will be to you. By your Catechising of them, you will maintain your Authority over them.⁶⁶

As the assertion that authority comes only from doing one’s duty suggests, the idea of the “adult” reader was, paradoxically dependent upon readers and citizens remaining “as
children,” even within their autonomy. In reality, catechizing represented an ongoing process of identifying with one’s subjugation.

The catechism form did not disappear once readers had learned the catechism, but continued to shape their reading of other texts. Writers frequently used a question format when writing sermons and children’s books, as if they were writing half of a catechism and expecting the reader to respond with approved answers. For example, in The Religion of the Closet (1705), which I discuss in more detail in the following section, Mather asks, “And therefore, To Live without Secret Prayer . . . is it not plainly to Despise the Holy Commandment of the Lord JESUS CHRIST?” and later, “What will you now do, but go tell all unto a Lord, who will Pity you, not Upbraid you, Relieve you and not Reproach you?”67 While the question format makes it appear as if he is asking readers for genuine answers, Mather’s prodding demonstrates that this is not the case. Elsewhere, Mather does not only ask questions for the readers, but actually puts words in their mouths: “But methinks I hear some of you now Enquiring, What shall we do, that we may become Agreeable unto our Parents?”68 As we will see in the next section, the catechism came to coexist with other strategies of textual governance that accompanied the development of new reading practices. Increasingly, reading was done silently, outside of the boundaries of authority figures, and thus new means had to be developed to “write” on the child reader.

‘The Bible is a Letter unto You’: The Religion of the Closet

Perhaps even more than the catechism, a central aspect of Puritan literary pedagogy was a group of reading and meditating practices that Mather terms, in a 1705
The word “closet,” in this period, referred to a small, private room, usually used for devotional practice. The term was used in this way as early as the sixteenth century: for example, in Angel Day’s comment in the *The English Secretorie* (1586) that “We doe call the most secret place in the house appropriate unto our owne private studies . . . a Closet.” Historians have documented that, as the seventeenth century progressed, there was increasing division of the home into private and individualized spaces: “Closets for prayer, private chapels for private masses, cabinets for reading and storing collectibles and oddities.” But the concept of the closet referred to more than just a physical space. An enclosed space seemingly removed from the public and from publication, the closet acted as an external metaphor for an individual, interior self. Writers often spoke figuratively of the “closet of the heart” and the “closet of one’s conscience.” The closet came to signify less a literal, physical space, than a figurative way of conceptualizing privacy and interiority, especially in the American colonies where living spaces were tight.

The closet’s association with interiority is emphasized repeatedly in seventeenth-century book titles that advertise an “opening” of the closet to reveal a person’s private life or household secrets: *A Wise Virgins Lamp Burning; Being the experiences of Mrs. Anne Venn, Written By Her Own Hand, and Found in Her Closet After Her Death* (1658); *The Queens Closet Opened Being Incomparable Secrets in Physick, Chyrurgery, Preserving, and Candying &c.* (1655); *The Wand’ring Whores Complaint for Want of Trading, Wherein the Cabinet of Her Inquiry is Unlockt and All Her Secrets Laid Open* (1663). As these very different titles suggest, the closet has long been understood as a way to hide private “secrets” from public view, even though the phrases “skeletons in the
“closet” and “coming out of the closet” did not become widespread until the mid-twentieth century. The titles also reveal that the closet was not wholly separate from the public or from publication. The insides of closets, though understood as private, were subject to considerable public curiosity and discussion. The closet, then, could act out two seemingly paradoxical functions; it could encourage intensely personal and individualized moments of experience, shielding them from public view, and it could contain individual experience, enacting various kinds of discipline, control, and even exposure. While the above uses of the term “closet” are mainly secular, they nonetheless reveal why the closet served as a perfect emblem for the Puritan religious project: the private identities represented by and formed inside the closet were autonomous, individualized, but they were also contained, circumspect. The self, like the closet, was built with set boundaries.

Children were the primary objects for the project of shaping closet selves. With more than a little urgency, Mather links the period of identity formation with confinement in the closet: “Young Man, Run, Run into thy Closet and there Speak and Pray; and Weep unto thy Savior . . . Children, I Demand your Immediate Compliance.” In addition to a period of life when closet activity was particularly encouraged, childhood became a primary way through which to conceive the very process of forming and maintaining an enclosed identity, which was ideally a sustained practice of Puritan religious and civic identity. In The Religion of the Closet, Mather constantly refers to his audience as “children,” even though young people were not the only audience for the sermon. The child becomes an illustration of a closet self continually defined by limitations: of size, of
space, and, most importantly, of entitlement. By imagining his or her truest self as a child in the closet, the ordinary citizen made restriction internal to identity.

Printed books, especially those for children, became the technology through which authors both marked and traversed the boundaries of the closet self. For the technology to work, readers needed to develop new reading habits, practices, and skills beyond those of the catechism. In *The Religion of the Closet*, Mather explains that the task of the closet is to “read the *Word of God* . . . with *Meditation. Pause* and *Think* upon what you *Read.*”75 As this passage suggests, closet subjectivity was closely related to silent reading, a practice that was still in its formative stages and which was becoming more common as the number of reading materials grew.76 During the seventeenth century, the Bible was moved from the church to the individual household, “with the ultimate privatization occurring within the individual reader.”77 Silent reading was not without its cautions; Jean-Francois Gilmont observes that “reformers were not interested in inviting the faithful to discover new messages, but rather in guaranteeing the stability of an elementary Christian doctrine.”78 Yet, by the end of the seventeenth century, church leaders were actively encouraging the most unpredictable readers, including children and the poor, to participate in this practice.79

While many books still might be purchased for family use, children were, for the first time, owning books individually. In his 1712 sermon, Mather says that parents who do not provide Bibles for their children are “worse than sea-monsters.”80 In *A Token for Children*, several dying children bequeath their books as legacies to other children in the family. For example, Tabitha Alder leaves her Bible and a few other books to her mother and little sister.81 The association of reading with individual ownership, private spaces,
and silent “alone time” set the stage for the imagination of literacy as intimately related to identity. At the same time, as objects that were authored by others and publicly sold, books lent social inclination and shape to private understandings of self.

*Token* was part of a larger genre, what I call the “child death narrative,” that both records and helps to create the phenomenon of the closet reader. Like the later conduct books of the eighteenth century, child death narratives were designed to produce a specific kind of individual subject by providing examples to emulate. The “examples,” in this case, were “true” accounts of pious children who died young, and who, through the texts, gained the status of ideal citizens and believers. The number of printings and editions suggest that the death narratives were widely enough read to have a relatively strong effect on actual reading practices. *Token*, which contained an entire collection of death narratives, was the most frequently reprinted children’s book of the century after *The New England Primer*, and other individual death stories often appeared in three or more editions, sometimes on both sides of the Atlantic. In the stories, children are specifically associated with private and silent reading; heroes and heroines are frequently seen reading by themselves in the closet, in corners, and even in bed. By providing these examples, the texts encourage their readers to adopt these behaviors, presumably by reading the death narratives themselves, and suggest, simultaneously, that closet reading is becoming commonplace. As a result, these reading practices come to have special community status as the primary means of identifying early piety, the mark of a good citizen and believer. In *A Little Book for Little Children*, Thomas White argues that “those who are holy young are the holiest” and that “all that go to Heaven must be little Children or like little Children.” These declarations suggest that anyone who wanted to
be godly should read his book as a child reader, an appellation that was increasingly understood to mean reading in the closet.\textsuperscript{82} Death narratives even cast the child’s closeted subjectivity as a duty and obligation of community membership that should be emulated by “persons of riper years.”\textsuperscript{83} Sarah Rede, who writes about her daughter Cartaret in \textit{A Token for Youth}, makes it clear that while her text was primarily written for children, adults might also find it inspiring.

The idea of the effortless child reader was attractive because it allowed authors to make pius reading coextensive with authentic identity, even as the innateness of these duties was called into question by the urgency of leaders’ encouragement of them. The child “examples” in child death narratives read early, read often, and read alone. Caleb Vernon, of \textit{The Compleat Scoller}, learns to read at age four. In \textit{Early Piety Exemplified in Elizabeth Butcher of Boston, who was born June 14\textsuperscript{th} 1709 and died July 13\textsuperscript{th} 1718} (1725), the central character begins learning to read at age two and a half. The author emphasizes that Elizabeth is constantly reading alone and in private spaces: “It was her practice to carry her Catechism of some other good Book to Bed with her, and in the morning she would be sitting up in her Bed Reading before any of the Family were awake besides her.”\textsuperscript{84} She links this reading to the formation of identity by asking herself catechism-like questions that she has devised herself; for instance, she asks herself whether she is sufficiently prepared for death and answers that she will submit her life to God’s will.\textsuperscript{85} Other child characters, such as those in \textit{A Token for Children}, are found in the closet or corner at very young ages, weeping and praying to God. One girl, age four, “was many a time, and often, in one hole or another, in tears upon her knees.”\textsuperscript{86} The authors of the child death narratives emphasize that the good children go to closet prayer
as soon as they can “speak plain,” or as White says, “nay sooner than [they] can speak plain.” For example, John Sudlow of *A Token for Children* has a sense of God and the other worldly before he has learned language and will “naturally run to his Book without bidding.” Early piety and early reading are used rhetorically to suggest that closet citizenship duties are instinctive and voluntary and, thus, that there is no distinction between a socially enforced practice of literacy and a natural expression of individual identity through closet reading.

Even so, the very existence of the death narratives, as well as the multiple sermons about the closet, suggest that they require special prodding on the part of community leaders. In Mather’s first sermon on the religion of the closet, he commands that those in “Early Childhood,” must “Get Alone” as soon they “can first Go Alone.” His labored prose suggests that it takes some conscious awareness to equate “going alone,” which is a neutral description of one’s location away from others, and “getting alone” which is a practice of prayer, silent reading, and emotional outpouring in the closet. In the second sense of being alone, the very experience of having a self that can be isolated becomes conceptually linked to having a self that is deferential.

The task for authors was to make these two notions of selfhood inseparable, a project that, in practice, was often complicated and imprecise. As Mather’s emphasis on the word “alone” suggests, closet reading afforded the child reader unprecedented autonomy. While the diminutive space of the closet implied that this autonomy was inherently limited, there was still a surprising amount of space for readers’ improvisations upon traditionally pious behaviors. Reading was to be unaccompanied and relatively unsupervised, separate from structured family reading practices like
catechizing, creating the potential for meaning to become located, not within the explication of an authority figure or even within the text, but within readers’ individual perceptions. As a result, child readers began to claim ownership of their books, not only by physical possession but through their individual creation of meaning.

In his 1712 sermon about closet practices for children, Mather emphasizes the interpretive, personal nature of closet reading by comparing Puritan reading material to an epistle. He claims that “the Bible is a Letter from Heaven as much unto you, as if your very name were in the subscription of it.” Signifying both the presence and absence of God’s authority, the letter acts as an appropriate symbol for the reading of the closet. On one hand, as God “authors” the letter, the image emphasizes the hierarchical, though intimate, relationship that the Puritans believed that the individual should have with God. Yet more subtly, and perhaps unwittingly for Mather, it foregrounds the distance between religious authority and the child reading in the closet, a distance that appears to allow the child reader a considerable amount of independence. In both cases, the image implies that the reader will participate in the creation of meaning from the text by “writing back” to God.

Mather authorizes readers to add to, alter, and personalize their texts, and to otherwise “write back” through personal reflection and prayer. He recommends that readers mark places in the Bible that have to do with their own situations, and then meditate on those passages. Readers frequently did this by listing names, birth dates, marriages, deaths, and other family milestones in their personal Bibles, marking them as their own texts. Some used “commonplace books” to copy phrases and sentences from the Bible and expand upon them. Mather explicitly encourages his children to write in
their own blank books about what they have read, a process that simultaneously values individual expression and mimics the psychological “writing” on the *tabula rasa* of the mind.\(^9\)

In addition to the Bible, readers also personalized children’s books, such as the death narratives, in order to assert individualized identities. In a 1725 copy of Elizabeth Butcher’s death narrative, there are three signatures at the back, all from young women also named Elizabeth: “Elizabeth Helyn her Book given to her by Mary Mather. Elizabeth Golty her Book given to her by Hannah Colegrove. Elizabeth Coxacre.” The fact that the book was given to three women with the same name as the central character does not seem coincidental. As the buyer of the book, at least in the first two cases, was not the child herself, the book might have been purchased as a tribute to the recipient, suggesting she was like the pious child in the book. A more likely interpretation: the book might have been given as a hopeful and not-so-subtle nudge for its child recipient to imitate Butcher’s good behavior. But in either case, giving a child named Elizabeth a book about a girl named Elizabeth somehow implies that the text is rightly hers, that it is to be read and interpreted by her alone. The signatures declare this, as each child signs that the text is “her book.” Personalized in this way, the book may have inspired a readerly fantasy of identification, in which readers imagined getting attention and praise in the manner of the book’s central character. And, of course, the real Elizabeths could enjoy an even greater triumph than the textual one, as they could garner all of the imagined glory without having to die to get it.

Death narratives encouraged children to participate in the creation of meaning by depicting children directing and shaping their own stories and appearing as authoritative
readers of other texts. Death narrative authors frequently present themselves as mere
documentary editors of what the central child characters have said and written,
suggesting it is children who have the power to shape the meaning of their lives and texts.
The children’s remarks about God, other members of the household, and books they read
are taken down word for word. In *Token*, Janeway remarks that one child, Susannah
Bicks, said many things that were “pass’d by without Committing to Paper, which
deserved to have been written in Letters of Gold.”"92 Besides attributing considerable
significance to the words of a child, this passage makes it appear that the author has
limited control over his text and relies on the child to direct her own story. It is
impossible to know whether Janeway is being genuine here, or even whether Susannah
Bicks’s story is true, but the power that he grants to his child characters is not unusual.
The author of *The Compleat Scholler* (1666) similarly insists on accuracy and
documentation, claiming that Caleb Vernon’s death narrative consists of “relicks at last . . .
faithfully set down for you and yours in writing from his mouth” except “what was lost
through the too great carelessness of such as were about him in his sickness.”93 Cartaret
Rede’s death narrative begins with the author saying, “you have [the story] in its native
simplicity, as it dropt from her mouth, without any variation as I know of.”94

While some death narrative children merely shape the texts by their dying
expressions, scrupulously transcribed by a relative or friend, others are granted an even
more direct role in the creation of the text’s meaning. At the end of Cartaret Rede’s
narrative, the author includes several letters that the child has written. This part of the text
prefigures the epistolary novels of the eighteenth century, in which authors presented
themselves as mere editors of their fictional characters’ letter collections. In another text,
A Legacy for Children: Being Some of the Last Expressions, and Dying Sayings of Hannah Hill (1717), the author and/or printer goes so far as to suggest that Hannah Hill is actually the author of the text; it is “signed” H.H., even though Hannah is dead by the time the text is published. The effect of this for child readers is that the relationship between author/reader is cast as a relationship among relative equals rather than as an authority figure speaking to the child reader. It also suggests that meaning is located in the child character, and by extension the child reader, not the adult “editor” who has compiled the story. Of course, as the “editor” is probably really the author, the child’s expression is, in reality, carefully controlled, but there is an appearance of freedom within the constraint, one that is not likely to be entirely lost on the child reader.

Child characters are also consistently granted authoritative reader status. Cartaret Rede’s reading choices, practices, and reactions are scrupulously documented. For example, one night she is “found in tears” while reading James Janeway’s Invisibles, Realities, Demonstrated in the Holy Life and Triumphant Death of Mr. John Janeway (1690), a response typical of children in death narratives. In A Little Book for Little Children, Thomas White tells the story of a little boy who died “while still in coats” at age 8. Like other child heroes of the time, the boy reads the Bible constantly and is often found alone in a corner, the traditional alternative to the closet if a child did not have a room of his or her own. He not only marks passages that he finds particularly “precious,” but gains a powerful voice in his family by encouraging his younger siblings to do the same. What’s more, White includes 84 Bible passages in his text that the child has marked, taking up a considerable amount of space in his own narrative. While it is not clear whether or not the child’s story is a true one, and consequently, whether White is
really publishing passages given to him by a child reader, he maintains the appearance that this is the case. He does not edit the passages in any obvious way or include any of his own commentary, a practice that grants the child’s reading practices considerable autonomy. The effect is that the child reader appears to commandeer authority from White altogether.\textsuperscript{98}

The death narratives even occasionally license child readers to challenge parental authority through reading. In a story of an unnamed five-year-old boy’s death, White remarks that he took so much “delight in his Book that his Father and Mother have seen cause sometimes to hide away his Book from him.”\textsuperscript{99} This passage suggests that the child’s voracious reading distracts from the parents’ authority to the point that they must take away the book to regain control. While the passage literally illustrates the power that adults had to regulate children’s reading habits, White uses it to applaud the child for his exemplary reading behavior and commitment to God. Consequently, his comment may have been interpreted by child readers as permission to pursue an individual reading experience unregulated by parental authority figures. Janeway presents a similar story in \textit{Token}. John Harvey, a child between ages six and seven, gets sore eyes and is ordered to stop reading by both his parents and a doctor, but he is “so greedy of reading the scriptures . . . that he would scarce allow time to dress himself.”\textsuperscript{100}

While Puritan society remained overwhelmingly hierarchical and the identities created by closet reading were mostly compatible with patriarchal hierarchies, certain rationales for individual resistance arose. While authors agreed that children were to be obedient to their parents even beyond childhood, children were allowed to be disobedient
if their parents’ bidding conflicted with the commands of God. Janeway claims that this is why Harvey disobeys his parents in his reading:

He was excessively Dutiful to his Parents, and never did in the least dispute their Command, except, when he tho’t they might cross the Command of God (as in the forementioned business of reading the scriptures when his Eyes were so bad).

Thus, death narratives not only allow children rationale for disobedience but also tacitly license them to interpret texts, including both the Bible and the conduct books, themselves to judge when such defiance might be justified. Children and parents might not only disagree about when reading was appropriate, as in White’s story, but also in how to read particular commands and duties.

Death narratives suggest that children sometimes used their interpretations of piety to challenge traditional hierarchies. In Elizabeth Butcher’s narrative, the central child character uses remarks about Christ to chastise her relatives for not giving her what she wants:

Her Aunt Stone being present, and the Child being in great Pain and complaining of those about her for refusing to do some thing for her which she found relieved her, but they were fearful of overdoing, she said, They do not pity me, but I hope Christ pities me, and will prepare a Place for me.

Far from a truly pious statement, this comment on Elizabeth’s part serves mainly to manipulate her relatives into answering her demands. It is by appealing to piety that she is able to excuse such behavior. Butcher is not the only death narrative heroine who uses her piety in an unorthodox way. In A Token for Youth, Cartaret Rede constantly excuses bad behavior with lip-service to traditionally pious viewpoints. Early in the narrative, she
cries because she can’t have a special treat that she wants, presumably some sort of fruit or sweetmeat. Her likely well-meaning mother thinks it will make her sick and asks her if she wants to die. The child answers that she does want to die so she can go to heaven.\textsuperscript{106} Cartaret’s comment that she does not fear death and wants to go to God is a mark of the ideal Puritan, but the context reveals that she is essentially using her religion to manipulate her mother. In a similar scene, Cartaret’s mother is having a nice outfit made for her. Cartaret comments that she would rather die than have it, because she does not want to be a sinner.\textsuperscript{107} Again, the remark fits with Puritan theology, in that Cartaret is rejecting worldly dress in favor of spirituality. Nonetheless, Cartaret displays an incredible lack of gratitude to her mother for the care that she is attempting to give. In yet another passage, Cartaret rationalizes her bad behavior by making it part of God’s plan. She had misbehaved while her mother is gone, and when her mother returns, she insists that she forgive her because “it is God’s will.”\textsuperscript{108}

Nonetheless, these staged child rebellions were always part and parcel with control. While the texts depicted individuals and readers that were self-determining, they were also anxious about the authority given to these private and closeted readers. The increase in attention to the individual in the late seventeenth century has tempted several historians of the family to make a teleological argument that moves from an oppressed and indoctrinated self (and child) to an increasingly “free” or emancipated self.\textsuperscript{109} Yet, the process of becoming an individual was also a process of becoming constrained. The very examples of child resistance I have referenced demonstrate the limitations of the subjectivity being offered. The dying children, by and large, have already adopted identities that are encouraged by society. Their resistance comes only within the very
limited space of the deathbed (not entirely unlike the closet) and is represented by improvisations on the language usually reserved for pious declarations. It is only by reading against the texts’ larger depiction of the children’s religious exemplariness—by reading badly, from an orthodox Puritan standpoint—that their rebellion appears at all. Authors employed deliberate strategies to curtail such “bad” reading and behavior in the closet, using the same ideas and texts that allowed for its expression.

It is no coincidence that Mather was one of the most prolific writers in the colonies, publishing some 400 books over the course of his lifetime: he extends his governance into the closet through text. The child reader, as developing reader, bears the brunt of Mather’s force, but child readers also come to embody the need to constrain and regulate readers in general, to the extent that writers often cast all readers as “children” insofar as they occupy the private space of the closet. In his *The Privie Key to Heaven; Or Twenty Arguments for Closet-Prayer* (1665), Thomas Brooks compares children and closet practitioners. He prefaces the book with an extended metaphor comparing the child punished by the rod to the individual believer punished by God through affliction. The preface continues for over 50 pages and details the ways in which afflictions are like the rod, the various lessons to be learned from the rod, and the benefits of this type of punishment. Brooks’ choice to begin a book on the closet with an extremely long preface placing the reader in the position of the child suggests that this positioning is crucial to his articulation of closet reading practices. Brooks and Mather evoke the figure of the child to emphasize dependence and subordination to God. The parallel attempts to curtail any potentially dangerous uses of the autonomy that the closet might seem to invite. It also blurs the line between actual child readers and adult readers, in that the latter are
supposed to imagine themselves as “like children under the rod” when they read. In this way, children remain emblematic for the ambitions that authors had for readers and citizens in general.

Brooks’ maneuvering to bring the rod into the closet foregrounds the special disciplinary challenge of the closet in a society that relied largely on public inspections like catechizing and public (and semi-public) punishments for those who did not conform to the capital laws. The mechanisms that we tend to associate with Puritan discipline are, by and large, spectacles: the rod, the stocks, and public executions. These acts relied on a logic of publication, both of the sinner’s crime and its retribution; they were often accompanied with literal publication in the form of pamphlet execution sermons and criminal confessions. Civic penalties were a public approximation of what the offender would encounter only privately: the devil’s punishment after death.\textsuperscript{111} The closet, as private space, resisted the publicity and publication inherent in the execution. Mather writes in \textit{The Religion of the Closet}: “Would it not be Another Sin and an Open Sin, for men to Publish their Secret Sins, the sins which have been kept secret by the Providence of God?”\textsuperscript{112} Mather’s question implies a desire to cordon off the closet as a secure and privileged private space where citizens were accountable to no one but God for their behavior. This was partially because church leaders were worried that publicizing “secret sins” would encourage people to imitate them. For instance, Brooks claims that if sins were “written on [sinners’] foreheads,” this “publication” would benefit the devil and that God created the closet space to keep sins from being “blabbed.”\textsuperscript{113}

Yet, the intense desire to encourage closet activities suggests that private identities and actions were even more significant to Puritan civic and spiritual life than
were public acts. Thus, leaders had to develop technologies of subjection that could penetrate into readers’ most private and internalized spaces. Though they encouraged confession directly to God, the public stakes of a closet identity made leaders unwilling to rely solely on confession as a regulating mechanism. Instead, Mather and others sought to control secret sins through the behaviors and practices that were intrinsic to closet identity itself: specifically, through silent reading. In its very structures and practices, the subjectivity of the closet allowed for increased levels of spiritual control.

In particular, closet reading allowed authority figures to regulate and punish a new type of sin: the closet sin, known only to the individual sinner and inaccessible to traditional means of punishment. In *The Religion of the Closet*, Mather does not specify what kinds of sins qualify as “secret” ones, but in *The Pure Nazarite: Advice to a Young Man, Concerning an Impiety and Impurity (Not Easily to Be Spoken Of)* (1723), he makes it clear that one such “secret sin” is masturbation, a practice particularly associated with young boys. In this text, he creates a loophole in his earlier argument that such sins must not be published and thereby conceives of a way to discipline these sins by virtue of the cautionary book or tract. He says that while God has said it is a shame to publish secret sins, “I am to write of those things, which it is a shame to speak of, and I shall hope to do it so, that you will be Ashamed and also Afraid of doing them.”114 In this passage, Mather claims a special privilege for writing as a means of enforcing punishment and exposing secret sexual acts. The “sin” of masturbation presumably happens in spaces much like the enclosed closets that Mather wants readers to use for reflection and prayer. In this passage, Mather uses his text to access the secret space of the closet and enforce correct behavior there. Not surprisingly given this strategy of governance, Mather frequently
gave away his printed works in order to spread his lessons. In his diary, he remarks about his closet sermon for children, “It may have the tendency further to advance Piety in the Country, if I give the Public, by way of the Press, the Sermon I have newly preached.”

Though subtitled “a letter forced into the press,” *The Pure Nazarite* must have given Mather a similar hope, as it was explicitly composed to be a printed sermon.

As Mather gains the unique power to intrude upon the internal and private space of the reader through writing, it is through reading that the potential child sinner will be corrected. The writing in the Bible, elsewhere subject to interpretation and personal reflection, becomes a clear chastising force in *The Pure Nazarite*. Mather tells his readers to “Think, *It is written*, that they who do such things as I am now Tempted unto, have the *Wrath of GOD* impending over them; Think, *It is written*, That they who do such things as I am now Tempted unto, *shall be shut out from the Kingdom of GOD.*” Sinning, in this passage, becomes linked with poor reading and misguided textual interpretation. A good reader is not someone who simply reads alone in the closet, but someone who interprets “what is written” as Mather does and acts accordingly. The penalty for misinterpreting the Bible is akin to sinning and will be punished by eternal damnation, as Dawes makes clear in *The Duties of the Closet*, when he warns readers that they “dare not surely . . . deride his words, who can in a moment turn us into Hell for doing so.”

Thus, Mather must enforce “correct” reading even in the interpretive space of the closet. At the end of the text, he emphasizes the disciplinary power of reading by telling readers what to do when they are faced with temptation: “And resolve, that you will Immediately *read over again the letter* which you have now in your hands.”
Brooks, in his tract on closet duties, also uses the image of the letter to enforce correct reading and behavior, claiming that only the pious will be able to read God’s word at all:

The Law of God to wicked men is a sealed book, that they cannot understand . . .

‘Tis as blotted paper, that they cannot read. Look as a private letter to a friend contains secret matter that no man else may read, because it is sealed. So the Law of Grace is sealed up under the privy seal of Heaven, so that no man can open it or read it, but Christ’s faithful friends, to whom ‘tis sent.\textsuperscript{119}

Brooks’ metaphor of God’s word as “private letter” and “sealed book” hints that those who do not read correctly and apply God’s lessons to their behavior will suffer the ultimate punishment: being completely shut out from reading and, consequently, from grace itself. Silent reading is cast as a privilege only for those who will use it to discipline themselves and promote godly behavior.

These conceptions of reading allowed clergymen authors to use children’s books and sermons as a means to transport terror-inducing images of punishment into the closet, as a means to shape children’s behavior there.\textsuperscript{120} Predictably, the ultimate images of punishment that child readers encountered were of the torture that sinners would receive when thrown into hell. In children’s books, the endless burning that characterizes the devil’s punishment rivals even the most graphic depiction of the criminal burning at the stake. These books, unlike the public execution, could be taken directly into the closet for children to experience. Additionally, authors could depict personalized versions of hell to torment their child readers, choosing the images and ideas that would frighten these
readers the most. In *A Little Book for Little Children*, White describes hell in such a way that children will easily be able to imagine the torture there:

> To lie a whole night tormented of the Tooth-ach, how tedious doth one night seem, or with a fit of the Gout, or Head-ach, or any part of the Body in torment one night? When then will it be to have the Head-ake, or Heart-ake, and Bowels, and Body, and Soul, and all tormented, ten thousand of millions of millions of Years?

White encourages his readers to fear hell by mentally and physically estimating what it will be like to feel such pain, preferably when they are alone in bed at night. In another passage, he speaks admiringly of a boy who burns his finger when he is tempted to sin, so it will remind him of what hell will feel like on his whole body. Like the child imagining a toothache, the finger-burning boy imagines the punishment of hell while he is alone in a personal and closet-like space. While this act resembles the torture of public punishment, it aims to penetrate even deeper into the child’s consciousness to effect reform. With the aid of their books, children could conduct their own punishments and police the boundaries of acceptable subjectivity. As this combination of closet and punishment suggests, constraint is not opposed to subjectivity, but instead encourages a particular kind of subjectivity that is shaped by the possibility of punishment.

Brooks’ extended metaphor comparing God’s afflictions to rods emphasizes that this kind of constrained subjectivity must be continually maintained by all readers, even adults. While the rod requires that the punishment be enacted in the semi-public space of the household, afflictions do not have such a restriction. Instead, they can be privately experienced and felt when the reader is beyond the reach of traditional mechanisms of subjection. Brooks even describes afflictions as something that we might expect to find in a seventeenth-century “closet” of household remedies:
Look as salt brine preserves things from putrefying . . . so sanctified Rods, sanctified Afflictions, preserves and keeps the People of God from sinning . . . they are a potion to carry away ill humours . . . they are a corrosive to eat out the dead flesh.¹²⁴

God, like the housekeeper with a closet of secrets, “bruises his spices [believers] to make them send forth the greater Aromatical Savour.”¹²⁵ Unlike the rod, afflictions do not require that readers be children, but force adult readers to occupy the symbolic position of the child being whipped. Mather even claims in Help for Distressed Parents (1695) that God sometimes makes rods of children, in order to punish their defunct parents.¹²⁶ The expectation was that the ideal citizen would be like a child in his or her submission to the lesson conveyed by various kinds of suffering. Afflictions cannot be “grown out of” or left behind when achieving “adult” status. Believers can only be the recipients of this kind of rod and can never wield its power, which is inflicted only by God.

Closet readers ultimately are meant continually to annex their identities to the rod, so that minimal outside intervention is necessary to implement good behavior. Brooks suggests that once the punishment of the rod has been transferred into the closet, it can go even further by being internalized in the believer’s own mind. He points out that the voice of conscience and “the voice of the rod” usually echo one another: “Conscience is Gods deputy, Gods spie, Gods notary, Gods viceroy . . . Conscience is Gods preacher in the bosome.”¹²⁷ This image, which blends legal and religious imagery, reveals that the subjectivity developed in the closet is meant to be an extension of civic and divine mechanisms of power. Eventually, children were meant to internalize all of the cautionary lessons of their books, so that they could replace the physical book as a disciplinary device. In Help for Distressed Parents, Mather tells his child readers to
“Treasure up [parents’] Admonitions, as the sons of Cassius, did the Books of their Father; who being threatened, That the Books of your Father should be Burnt, bravely Answered, Then must you Burn us too, for we have his Books in our Hearts.” In this passage, Mather argues the very identity that the child has developed in the closet, and indeed the deepest and most internal part of it, the child’s “heart,” will serve to control his or her behavior. In an image that recalls Brooks’ depiction of conscience, he explains that God has two lamps: “The Lamp within us, or the Soul; And the Lamp without us, or the Law.” This image suggests that when the sinner’s actions are not “lighted upon” by the law, the soul itself will carry out a similar regulatory function.

‘Let That Be Theatre Enough’: The Problem of Affectation

Even as closet subjectivity was becoming a major facet of Puritan governance, the metaphors of conscience as “God’s spie” and of the soul as a lamp point to residual mistrust of the new notions of self, reader, and citizen. Leaders believed that children who were in the closet still required external regulation and monitoring. Ultimately, closet reading did not replace older forms of discipline that required public performances of subjection, but coexisted with them. Despite all methods, as we have seen, reading imperatives were imperfectly mapped onto actual child readers, a fact that must have been all too obvious to Puritan authority figures. To confront this problem, Mather reminds readers that, even in the dark and private space of the closet, they have a light, and therefore an eye, on them. The eye does not belong to a church leader or officer of the law, rather it belongs to God, who represents and trumps all other rulers. As Mather writes in *The Religion of the Closet*: “When you are, where no Eye sees you, do
not forget, that the Eye of the omnipresent God sees you . . . It is, to be under the Eye of God, as having the Eye of a mighty Prince always upon us.”\textsuperscript{132} He warns closet believers that if they encounter temptations, they should “answer” them while imagining God’s eye is upon them. Brooks also uses the image of the Eye of God: “We cannot get into any blind hole, or dark corner, or secret place, but the Lord hath an eye there.”\textsuperscript{133} While Brooks’ and Mather’s guides to closet practices attempt to carry out discipline themselves, they also enlist the readers’ imagination of God (and presumably, God himself) to ensure that it is being enacted.

Nonetheless, there is evidence that Puritan parents were reluctant to rely solely on God, books, and the child’s imagination as surveillance. Children’s texts suggest that if parents were not comfortable with their children’s ability to internalize the gaze, they could regulate children’s reading themselves. After all, the space of the closet, while removed from parents’ eyes, was relatively small and easy to monitor. For this reason, it is no surprise that closets and corners were used not only for praying but also to confine unruly children. Despite the theory of the closet and the increasing division of the home, American colonial homes were still rather modest in size. Individual family members, especially children, might not have rooms of their own to use as their “closets.” Karen Calvert observes that in the typical colonial home, “There were no children’s rooms, as such, or even much sense of a private or personal space . . . children rarely found themselves completely alone.”\textsuperscript{134} Hence, children in death narratives frequently have to use the corner, a space that is always visible, to carry out their closet practices.

Child death narratives show that even if children were using a “closet” for secret duty, parents could be watching. In \textit{A Token for Children}, Sarah Howley is said to be
“very much in Secret Prayer, as might easily be perceived by those who listened at the Chamber Door, and was usually very importunate and full of tears.” When another child, John Harvey, goes to great lengths to make sure that he is actually alone when engaged in secret prayer, Janeway describes a relative hiding and listening to him to see what he prays for. In another story, Janeway hints that parents used physical evidence to determine how their children acted in secret; one “poor child” was “made Conscious of secret Duty; and when he prayed, ‘twas with such extraordinary meltings, that his eyes looked red and sore, with weeping by himself for his sin.” Thus, even if parents are not literally standing outside of the doors listening to their children, child death narratives demonstrate that they regularly monitored their children’s closet behavior and even saw fit to publish their children’s private practices when they died. In fact, child death narratives tacitly encourage parents to “spy” on their children, as doing so might allow them to publish their own narratives of their children’s lives. Despite his arguments about closet privacy, Mather examined his children daily on their evening meditations and had them write down the contents of their “secret” prayers to be inspected.

The introduction of external elements into the closet demonstrates the ways in which self-governance was still not fully accepted as a system. While Puritans believed that closet behavior must be private and independently motivated to be considered sincere, they also felt they needed to monitor the closet to ensure that this behavior met community standards. This inconsistent position created a conundrum surrounding affectation and performance. Writers feared that, when watched, children might simply perform the desired behavior to escape punishment without truly internalizing morality. This was compounded by the very pedagogy of fear that Puritans used, in their books, to
teach acceptable conduct. Locke’s *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), which was gaining steam at the time many of these Puritan authors were writing, claims that children motivated by fear are especially prone to dissimulation: “The Child submits, and dissembles Obedience, whilst the fear of the Rod hangs over him; but when that is removed . . . he gives the greater scope to his Inclination.”¹³⁹ Because of the possibility for insincerity, leaders saw the child’s private, closet self as indication of his or her authentic self, where public behavior might not be genuine. For example, Brooks says that “every man is that really, which is he is secretly . . . there are many that sweat upon the stage, that are key-cold in their closets.”¹⁴⁰ Mather makes a similar point in *The Religion of the Closet*: “Is it not a rare thing for *Hypocrites* to Delight more in *Secret Prayer*, than in acting upon a more *Publick Stage*?”¹⁴¹ In both of these passages, private behaviors, rather than public ones, act as the true indication of the good and pious subject and citizen. Yet, the very thing that makes private behavior reliable as an indication of authentic selfhood is compromised by what the Puritans saw as necessary attempts to monitor that behavior.

Thus, texts about the closet tend to convey a conflicted message when it comes to affectation or performance, reflecting the period’s difficult attempt to reconcile patriarchal governance and self-determination. On one hand, they insist that any behavior, inside or outside of the closet, be authentic and self-driven. To discourage gaps between the self and one’s public image, Brooks claims that “those who neglect God in secret will not be heard when they pray in public.”¹⁴² Any specter of performance inside the closet is also forbidden. Dawes cautions: “And it will be much better for us never to pretend to worship God in our closets than to deceive ourselves with a cold and careless,
an external and heartless worshipping of Him.” \(^{143}\) Brooks even goes so far as to criticize even those who pray in the closet with a loud voice, accusing them of dissimulation to avoid public criticism and punishment:

> Sometimes children when they are vexed or afraid of the rod, will run behind the door, or get into a dark hole, and there they will lye crying, and sighing, and sobbing, that all the house may know where they are. O ’tis a childish thing so to cry, and sigh, and sob, in our closets, as to tell all in the house, where we are, and about what work we are. \(^{144}\)

Brooks’ metaphor, linking the insincere closet believer with the disciplined child, suggests that those who simply act out good behavior in the closet do so out of a fear-driven desire to appear pious to those who are listening. The metaphor expresses a remote fear that children might naturally be inauthentic closet performers, prone to dramatic performances and affectation to avoid punishment. Mather likewise discourages publicizing one’s closet practices: “The Eye of the Great God, let That be Theatre Enough. Tho’ no mortal knows the Prayer, the tears, the Flights of Elevated Christianity, which you make in Secret Places, yet they are all known to the Infinite God.” \(^{145}\)

Yet, while the “theatre” is for God only, Mather’s metaphor nonetheless entails performance for an audience, reflecting the ways in which the private self must conform to older, public modes of subjection.\(^{146}\) Mather’s own texts, along with others, outlined specific “performances” to be associated with the identity of the closet. Mather admits in The Religion of the Closet that it is meant to be a “companion” to his “children” in the closet to “direct” what they’ll do. In the theatre passage cited above, Mather mentions that the reader should be performing “tears” and “Flights of Elevated Christianity.” While it is up to the reader to decide what these “Flights” might look like, the passage makes it clear that the reader’s approximation of this phrase is expected as part of closet behavior.
If the reader is still unsure, Mather provides a set of “stage directions” for closet practitioners by suggesting particular postures, such as walking, kneeling, and lying prostrate on the floor. In his 1712 sermon for children, he also makes recommendations as to where closet performers will get their “lines”: “You can’t be at any loss What you shall say. The CXIXth Psalm; the whole book of Psalms; all the whole Bible; the whole state of your Soul . . . will afford your materials for your supplication.” The ideal children in a book such as Token regularly bring into play dramatic postures and sayings such as these. Though their behavior is often naturalized by authors, who claim that the children have been doing these things since before they could “speak plain,” its faithful resemblance to Mather’s suggestions indicates that “authenticity” is best when it matches clergymen’s commands.

Closet reading, like closet prayer, is associated with a number of performative behaviors. For example, one of the children in Token, Mary A., reads with “much affection.” Janeway writes:

Her book was her delight and what she did read, she loved to make her own and cared not for passing over what she learned, without extraordinary observation and understanding; and many times she was so affected in the reading of the scriptures that she would burst out into tears and would hardly be pacified.

Other children in the text are constantly found crying, moaning, and otherwise outwardly responding to what they read. For example, a “certain little child” between ages two and three, “quickly learned to read the scripture and with great Reverence, tenderness, and Groans, read till tears and sobs were ready to hinder him.” As Janeway’s comment that Mary A. makes her books “her own” suggests, all of these behaviors are taken as an indication that the child is authentically moved by his or her books, and thus, that they are
having the desired effect in shaping the child’s subjectivity. Yet, these dramatic
expectations for behavior are precisely scripted in the books that children were reading,
hinting that authentic subjectivity is meant to be compatible with what authors dictate.

In his preface to *A Token for Children*, Janeway provides a script of readerly
behavior, complete with threats of physical punishment if the child does not comply. In a
series of catechism-like questions, Janeway encourages the child to answer:

“How art thou affected, poor Child, in the reading of this book? Have you shed
ever a tear since you began reading? Have you been by your Self upon your
knees; and begging that God would make you like those blessed Children? Or are
you as you used to be, as careless and foolish and disobedient and wicked as
ever?”

Despite the agency that would seem to be offered by asking the reader questions, these
questions have scripted answers for the virtuous child to deliver. They command a
particular set of behaviors that will surround the child’s reading of the book and that must
be performed in order to answer the questions truthfully. Janeway leaves the readers with
no mistake about what will happen to children who fail to respond authentically: “Why, I
will tell you, they which *Lie*, must to their Father the Devil into everlasting burning . . .
Would you not do anything in the world rather than be thrown into Hell Fire?” For
already pious child readers, telling the truth is not a problem. But Janeway’s preface puts
other children in a bind: they can either admit that they have not been following
Janeway’s “good” reading behaviors, facing worldly punishment, or they can lie and face
eternal damnation. Thus, child readers must learn to at least act out the correct behaviors,
everually assimilating them into their “authentic” identities. If children have any doubt
as to how to perform, Janeway gives them directions: “Methinks I see that pretty Lamb
begin to weep,” etc. While Janeway’s language here is affectionate, much of the preface
contains descriptive threats of punishment if the child does not obey. When identity failed
to provide the appropriate behavior, fear and shame would still do.

The Puritan child reader’s integration of individual identity and submission to
social order provides a key entry point into the history of children’s literacy in America,
as the blending of freedom and subjection was to be the central function of child
readership until at least the nineteenth-century. By the printing of children’s playbooks in
the eighteenth century, the subject of my next chapter, the notions of both individuality
and social order had changed significantly. With the creation of the new American
nation, the gap between personal and political space was no longer represented by a mere
closet door, but by an ever growing national map. Individual identity was no longer
linked only to local religious and civic culture, but also to a federal model of nationhood.
Further, due to greater cultural investment in the individual’s free consent to government,
the yoking of the individual and state needed an increased sense of intimacy, emphasizing
not only the citizen’s essential identity as patriarchal subject from the deepest layers of
his heart, but his (or, increasingly, her) close participation as both ruler and ruled in the
American democracy.

Perhaps taking a cue from the Puritan catalogue of emotional closet performances,
children’s books enacted this shift by encouraging displays of affection, sympathy, and
love for various authority figures, including parents, authors, and the books themselves.
This intimacy between child reader and an increasingly textual authority presents what
eighteenth-century thinkers saw as an even more effective solution to the tensions
between individual agency and submission discussed in this chapter; readers who obeyed
their books out of voluntary love appeared to be independent and free-acting, at the same time that their affection worked as a powerful force to shape their actions. As filial love was constructed as the desired response both to national authority and book, the reader and citizen remained infantilized, creating a lasting importance for children and child figures in the articulation of American identity.
CHAPTER 2

‘LEARN TO LOVE YOUR BOOK:’ EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY PLAYBOOKS AND
AFFECTIONATE CITIZENSHIP

In one of the first eighteenth-century children’s books to cross the Atlantic, The
Child’s New Play-Thing (1750), a child character asks how he is to become a good
 citizen. The answer: he must learn to “love his book” and to keep company only with
other children who do the same. This transatlantic children’s lesson signaled a relatively
new posture that children were asked to take, but by the end of the eighteenth century,
“loving one’s book”—referring sometimes to the Bible, but just as often to one’s primer
or favorite children’s story—had become an idiom for all forms of moral wholesomeness,
signifying a deep social investment in affectionate relationships. The phrase would come
to be so well-known to the American culture surrounding children’s reading that Louisa
May Alcott’s Meg could joke as late as 1869 that Laurie must “be good and love [his]
book, as the boys in the primer are told to do.”152 The rhetoric of love and affection
permeated not only the relationship between reader and author, but also a variety of
hierarchical social bonds, including those between children and parents, servants and
masters, and citizens and law. Historians have often linked this new cultural emphasis on
eighteenth-century political theorists and pedagogues were claiming at the time. The simultaneous rise of affectionate readership and the argument that citizens were “free” was not coincidental. The rhetoric of free citizenship that gained currency in the voluntary affection and pleasure in reading with the increased “freedom” and “liberty” of the child, the reader, and the citizen in general, an argument that echoes what many eighteenth century and contributed to the formation of the American nation was fully dependent on the status of child readers and their affections. As a result, the concepts of freedom and subjection, childhood and citizenship, and literacy and liberty, which I began to trace in the last chapter, have remained entangled well into the twenty-first century. In what follows, I consider the ways in which, through new modes of reading, the child’s affections and the citizen’s freedom came to be intrinsically linked, creating what I term “affectionate citizenship,” or the imagination that the citizen’s allegiance to the state is freely given and based on love. Over the course of my analysis, I argue that affection, as a tool of citizen-making, both enables and conceals major limitations in the citizen’s freedom, making the obedient child an apt representation of the ideal national subject.

As with many accounts of the origins of “American” ideas of citizenship, I turn my attention first to John Locke, the most influential political and pedagogical thinker read by America’s founders. Children were an integral part of Locke’s theoretical apparatus. In addition to including extensive analyses of childhood in his political works, he wrote a popular theory of the developing mind, An Essay on Human Understanding (1690), and an influential work on child governance, Some Thoughts Concerning Education (1693). As Locke’s continued preoccupation with the child might suggest, his
viewpoint on childhood was fraught with contradictions and tensions, the most significant of which involved his understanding of the fundamental relationship between children and citizens. His political theory rested on the assertion that parental power and political power were distinct, and that the child was not the same as a citizen, even as he simultaneously establishes the status of the child as the supreme measure of the citizen’s freedom. Through a close analysis of Locke’s work, I argue that he compares childhood and citizenship in order to imagine and ultimately produce the “affectionate” citizen, a political subject whose bond to the state was not merely rational, but also emotional. While Locke’s theories of the citizen are usually assumed to apply to property-holding adult male citizens, I demonstrate that affectionate citizenship takes its most exemplary expression in the child, and especially the female child, whose limited ability to possess or exercise civic rights paradoxically contributes to her status as ideal subject. Following my examination of Locke, I look closely at two popular eighteenth-century children’s books, Sarah Fielding’s *The Governess* (1749; 1st American edition, 1786) and Hannah Webster Foster’s *The Boarding School* (1798). These two texts, like Locke’s, characterize a significant moment of transatlantic exchange involving the figure of the child; Foster’s revisions to Fielding’s text reveal some of the ways in which the early republic attempted to distance itself politically from its colonial “parent.” Highlighting the modes of reading demanded by these texts, I argue that children’s books acted as a central technology of affectionate citizenship as the dominant mode of governance in the early American nation.

In trying to make sense of the child’s centrality in the formation of modern readership and citizenship, I bring into dialogue two seemingly contrasting current
theories of the citizen in American culture. On the one hand, I expand upon Lauren Berlant’s theory of “infantile citizenship,” in which “personal acts and values” are the primary activities of citizenship.\textsuperscript{154} On the other, following the work of Michael Warner, I argue that the foundation of American citizenship also relied on a more abstract and public notion of nationality, which was not localized in any direct relation between persons.\textsuperscript{155} Berlant claims that the child, who “paradoxically cannot yet act as citizen,” has come to represent the ideal citizenship in current American political and popular discourse. As a result, citizenship is defined not as a public identity based on political actions, but as a set of intimate, private, and domestic practices. Though Berlant sees infantile citizenship as largely a product of the right-wing politics of the Reagan era, I suggest that it is an integral and long-standing part of America’s political history. The eighteenth-century cultural fixation on affection as a quality of free citizenship placed considerable pressure on domestic relationships to produce and shape ideal subjects. Accordingly, the notion of “republican motherhood” that is understood to play a significant part in early American politics was enabled by an equally significant theory of “republican childhood.” Warner claims that citizenship is based on the notion of an abstract and textual public, one which tends to subsume the personal in favor of univocal and impersonal civic expression. As I argue, however, this “public” conception of citizenship was not completely at odds with the concept of infantile citizenship, which in fact depended upon the culture’s imagination that domestic relationships could approximate and influence the more abstract relations of citizenship. The child reader and her books provide the key link between an abstract or public imagination of citizenship and one that expresses itself primarily within the child and woman-dominated domestic
and educational spheres. Through the ideology of affectionate citizenship, children’s loving feelings and relationships, especially with their parents, became concomitant with political duties. Children’s books, which entailed both an extension of parental power and a translation of parent into text, acted as an intermediary step in this chain of imaginary political associations, creating an affectionate readerly relationship that was training for, and enactment of, the citizen’s relationship to nation and law.

‘Freedom without the Exercise of it’: Locke’s Unstable Relationship between Child and Citizen

Children have long been central to political theory, though historians have more often associated them with early modern systems of patriarchy than with early republicanism and free citizenship. As I noted in chapter one, the patriarchal subject was always metaphorically a child, a comparison that Locke’s “free” political system, and the American government based on that system, ostensibly rejects. Locke opens the first of his *Two Treatises of Government* (1690) with a critique of Sir Robert Filmer’s *Patriarcha* (1680), a classic text of seventeenth-century patriarchalism. In his critique, Locke rejects Filmer’s theory because it allows for a conception of the citizen as a “slave” to government, while he prefers to think of the citizen as a “freeman.” The gender and age designations implied by Locke’s use of the word “man” are significant in that he is particularly interested in affording free status to property-holding adult male citizens, whom Filmer has emasculated and infantilized by making subject to political rulers. The status of the child is nonetheless central to this discussion because Filmer’s rationale for the citizen’s subjection is that “no Man is Born free,” but is naturally subjugated to the
patriarch who bore him. For Filmer, the child’s submission to parental authority mirrors and indeed embodies submission to political rulers, who have received their power in a direct line from Adam by virtue of being fathers. The purpose of Locke’s first treatise is to explain how the citizen has a right to the “natural Freedom” that Filmer has denied, and thus Locke must begin, like Filmer, with the citizen’s originating moment in the birth of the male child. It is from Locke’s account of the child’s birth as a “freeman” that the bonds between the child’s and the citizen’s freedom begin to be forged in the modern imagination, ultimately allowing for a different designation of the ideal citizen’s age and gender.

Children create a specific problem for Locke because he needs to argue that the citizen is born free, while children are, by all appearances, born constrained and unequal. Thus, to make his case for the citizen’s “natural freedom,” Locke must make two contradictory statements regarding the status of children. On the one hand, he asserts that children are not like citizens because they have inherent incapacities that make them naturally subject to their parents. On the other, he argues that the “Begetting of Children makes them not Slaves to their Fathers,” just as the citizen is not a slave. This confusion surrounding whether or not children are free or subjected, like citizens or distinct from them, often makes for awkward and convoluted logic that reveals the instability of Locke’s major terms of freedom and subjection. Locke’s conflicting claims about children are best summarized in a paradoxical statement that he makes in his chapter “Of Parental Power”: “Children, I confess are not born in [the] full state of Equality, though they are born to it.”¹⁵⁷ Locke goes on to explain that being “born to” equality, but not “in” it means that the child’s subjection is temporary. When children attain reason, they
will be no longer subject to the power of their parents and will become free citizens: “when he comes to the Estate that made his Father a Freeman, the son is a Freeman too.” In this sense, the child and citizen are necessary opposites: one is subjected, while the other is free. At the same time, the citizen’s freedom is dependent upon the “free” status of the child at birth and upon the child’s education into freedom. In this way, the child and citizen are not separate positions but continuous ones.

Locke’s awkward formulation of the child being born “to” equality but not “in” it reveals how the child confounds the very distinction that he is trying to make between freedom and subjection, childhood and citizenship, and demonstrates that these terms are not wholly contradictory. Locke’s concept of freedom ultimately consists of subjection, whether to parent or to law. He explains that the reason that children cannot be completely free is that they cannot understand the law sufficiently to follow it:

But whilst [the child] is in an Estate, wherein he has not Understanding of his own to direct his Will, he is not to have any Will of his own to follow: He that understands for him, must will for him too; he must prescribe to his Will and regulate his Actions.

This assertion that children cannot be citizens because they must rely on their parents for guidance obscures the fact that the law replaces the parent by providing a new “understanding” of the world that the citizen must follow. Seen in this light, the child’s subjection thus does not contrast with the citizen’s freedom, but anticipates restrictions upon that freedom. The blurred relationship between child and adult explains Locke’s odd statement that the child is free and subjected, equal and unequal, at the same time. Because the situation of the child so nearly mirrors that of the citizen, Locke must insist upon the natural freedom of children in order to make the case for the citizen’s freedom,
even as this contradicts his earlier arguments and makes for a logical paradox: “Thus, we are born free, as we are born Rational; not that we have actually the Exercise of either.”\textsuperscript{160} Locke goes on to insist that the exercise of freedom comes with age, yet his equation of freedom and subjection suggests that “freedom without the exercise of it” is a state that the child and citizen share. While Locke’s account of the child is meant to establish the citizen’s innate freedom, a closer look reveals that he is using the situation of the child, to whose subjection few would object, to disguise the limitations in his definition of freedom for the adult citizen.

The mechanism that Locke ultimately uses to preserve the appearance of liberty for the child and the citizen turns out not to be “natural freedom” but a less likely candidate: 	extit{affection}. Affectionate relationships are, for Locke, a means to soften the fact of the child’s subjection and to depict that subjection as freedom. He explains, “The Bonds of Subjection are like the Swaddling Cloths [children] are wrapt up in, and supported by, in the weakness of their Infancy.”\textsuperscript{161} Locke argues that because parents only subject their offspring to discipline out of love, the restrictions they place upon their children are not inconsistent with their natural right to liberty. Though Locke denies the parallel between the child/parent and citizen/law relationships, his argument posits that the law operates in a similar way as the parent, only imposing constraints that are for the citizen’s ultimate protection. This rationale creates a messy formulation by which citizens give up their “natural” liberty in order to secure a more limited form of liberty: “But though Men when they enter into Society, give up the Equality, Liberty, and Executive Power they had in the State of Nature . . . yet it being only with an intention in every one the better to preserve himself his Liberty and Property.”\textsuperscript{162} As this passage reminds us,
modern citizenship relies upon the sacrifice of the citizen’s own power in favor of that of the state. While the child, who is lacking power, has no choice but to accept the protection given in place of liberty, the citizen consents to this uneven trade. Locke’s ostensible explanation is that the citizen consents to ensure the preservation of property, but his pedagogical texts further clarify that he relies on a more hidden, private force to carry out his model of citizenship: affection and, more specifically, the transfer of children’s affectionate feelings, through education, from their parents to the law. In the end, the citizen does not surrender his liberty out of mere self-interest, but out of love. Thus, while Locke begins with a concern for property-holding male citizens, his theory allows for an imagination of citizenship that is based not on the requirements of property, reason, independence, and adulthood, but on affectionate feelings and bonds. What’s more, the exercise of civic rights associated with property-holders is actually antithetical to the definition of free citizenship as loving subjection to law. For this reason, the foremost expression of the Lockean citizen in the public imagination came to be found, not in the adult males, but in female children, whose double exclusion from civil liberties such as voting and holding office made them, paradoxically, the ideal citizens. Children’s affections thus became critical to both the articulation of citizens’ freedom and the fact of their subjection.

As this crucial connection between the child and citizen suggests, Locke’s use of children in his political works was not merely rhetorical. The parallel between the child and citizen enabled the production of affectionate citizens who would subject themselves to law while simultaneously understanding themselves as free. Locke’s Some Thoughts Concerning Education (1693), which Jay Fliegelman reports was even more popular in
early America than *Two Treatises*, provided parents with a practical means to reproduce his version of affectionate citizenship.\(^{163}\) In this pedagogical work, which does not put the child/parent relationship in such a dangerously close connection with the citizen/law relationship, Locke is much more transparent about his desire to translate subjection into freedom. Indeed, his theory of child governance promises to give parents a way to enact this very goal:

> he that has found a way, how to keep a child’s spirit, easy, active and free; and yet, at the same time, to restrain him from many things he has a mind to, and to draw him to things that are uneasy to him; he, I say, that knows how to reconcile these seeming contradictions, has, in my opinion, got the true secret of education.\(^{164}\)

The “secret” for Locke turns out to be affection, which he describes as a specific means of creating docile behavior not only in childhood, but also into adulthood: “Would you have your Son obedient to you when past a Child? . . . So shall you have him your obedient Subject . . . whilst he is a Child, and your affectionate Friend when he is a Man.”\(^{165}\) Locke makes it clear that his affectionate citizen will believe himself to be free, but will still be constrained by the bonds that his parents have established: “We would be thought Rational Creatures, and have our Freedom . . . If therefore a strict Hand be kept over Children *from the Beginning*, they will in that [adult] Age be tractable, and quietly submit to it, as never having known any other.”\(^{166}\) The control of children’s affections is thus not fundamentally different from that of citizens, but a necessary *precursor* to it.

This pedagogy of affection had a profound effect on the ways in which child readers were encouraged to relate to their books. In *Some Thoughts*, Locke establishes books as training for citizenship by claiming that the relationship between child and book should mimic the power dynamic between parent and child, citizen and law. Child
readers, he argues, must be made subject to their books in a way that preserves their sense of liberty. To make reading “a Thing of Delight,” he suggests that “Contrivances might be made to teach Children to Read, whilst they thought they were only Playing.”

Reading was essential to the emergence of affectionate citizenship because, notwithstanding their similarities, an important difference remained between the child and the citizen. Children were subject only to the commands of their parents, while citizens’ subjection was to law, an entity that was much more distant, abstract, invisible, and, in many cases, textual. This shift, from a familiar allegiance based on “natural” subjection to a national allegiance that had to be trained, is nicely encapsulated by Christopher Looby’s observation that “Nations are not born, but made. And they are made, ineluctably, in language.”

Language practices such as reading are essential for initiating the child into a relationship with the intangible entities of law, nation, and government. As current scholars have noted, these institutions are largely “imagined” in terms of the citizen’s daily experience of them and thus rely upon the imaginative bonds fostered by print culture. Benedict Anderson, for example, argues that the nation is “an imagined community” that arises from citizens’ perception that they participate in the simultaneous reading of national texts.

Children’s books fit the category of texts through which Americans imagined a shared culture. By the late eighteenth century, the book market had increased even more rapidly than the population, with children’s books continuing to play an important role in its expansion. In addition to the books imported from English publishers such as John Newbery, at least 800 separate children’s titles were published in the U.S. between 1682 and 1836, a number that far exceeds the number of novels produced in the same
period. This figure excludes textbooks, which continued to be printed in enormous editions relative to other texts. For example, Noah Webster’s “blue back” speller, *The American Spelling Book* (1783), had sold five million copies by 1818. Like the speller, many children’s story books were best-sellers, going through multiple editions. Isaiah Thomas alone sold sixty-six children’s titles in 119 editions. These texts gradually became part of the national memory, as adults came to reminisce about learning “old blue-back” and reading children’s books such as *Mother Goose, Tom Thumb*, and *Little Goody Two Shoes*.

Literacy efforts coincided with the rise in printed texts, gaining momentum especially after the Revolution. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson both petitioned for the institution of public schools in the new nation, a call that nine out of the thirteen states answered. Lawmakers’ interest in children’s literacy was not incidental. As in the Puritan era, print and literacy were intimately related to learning and following the law. Legal discourse and print came to be increasingly associated with each other, as legislative documents and rudimentary law books became a staple for printers, rivaling theological books as the texts most frequently found in private libraries. The turn to print literacy had the effect of promoting nationalism; as early as the nineteenth century, literates were more likely to identify with the nation than with a community or ethnic group. Of course, efforts at encouraging print literacy had varying effectiveness, meaning that many citizens relied on a combination of other forms of literacy (oral, visual, manuscript) to carry out the tasks of everyday social life. For this reason, as we will see, texts for children tended to incorporate traditional forms, such as oral storytelling and letter-writing, in attempts to gain their readers’ affection for the printed page.
Ultimately, literacy levels were less important than what was signified by the act of loving one’s book, which could presumably be done from the first moments of basic instruction. Reading affectively, or for the purposes of engaging emotion, had long been considered to require less literacy than other modes of reading, and could therefore be illustrated by those with the least training: children. As Harvey J. Graff writes, “The level of literacy, in fact, could be quite low: a proper understanding of the words was not in itself essential. Literacy, however nominal, signified in theory the observance of an ordained and approved moral code.” Thus, what can be termed an early American fetishization of print and literacy signals less an effort to promote universal proficiency at reading printed texts than a multi-layered restructuring of authority and the ways in which it was understood to become emotive reality for the common citizen.

Print and its readers were important to the mechanics of citizenship within the newly formed nation because the nature of power had begun to shift. As Warner has claimed, the emerging American government gained authority by becoming abstract and representational, as opposed to embodied: “the task of republicanism [was] to remove legitimacy from the hands of persons.” Print culture became a medium through which impersonal and univocal expressions that constituted national identity and the people’s consent to government could be represented, establishing what Warner calls the “textual legitimacy” of the state. Nonetheless, affectionate citizenship and what I would term the “emotional legitimacy” of the state required that citizens relate to the nation as an object of affection, allowing their obedience to law to be seen as consistent with the freedom that Locke and the nation’s founders imagined. As Noah Webster remarks, every person in America “should know and love their laws” to maintain the liberty that is the
foundation of all republican nations. This ability to love the abstract construct of the law was especially crucial in the early American context because of the government’s supposed root within the people. Citizens needed to recognize laws as somehow derived from their families, friends, neighbors and loved ones, as well as from themselves. Because of the political need for citizens to love the law, private and domestic relationships, such as the relationship between child and parent, became vital preparations for and expressions of citizenship. “Free” citizenship was contingent upon children’s ability to love an authority that was absent and abstract, but to love it as if it were something tangible and real.

Despite his interest in reading, Locke does not fully explain the process by which the authority of the law replaces the authority of the parent in the child’s heart, a gap that must be filled with an analysis of the modes of reading taught by eighteenth-century children’s books. These books are the crucial link underlying Locke’s political theory, working to further establish the deep associations between the child’s affection and the citizen’s freedom that would come to permeate national discourse. The relationship between books and their readers came to be constructed as an intermediary step between the parent/child relationship and that of citizen and law, training children to transfer their affection and love for their parents to increasingly abstract ideals. Certainly eighteenth-century politicians and pedagogues did not take it for granted that the child, when transitioning from childhood to citizenship, would automatically understand how to relate to the abstract political concepts that this new status entailed. Rather, citizens had to be trained into an affectionate relationship with law by loving their books. As both material objects and representations of ideas, books could act as a bridge between the present and
absent, the immanent and representative, enacting the child reader’s gradual initiation into love and obedience for things that existed primarily as distant and abstract concepts, such as the law, virtue, and the nation. What’s more, American children’s books established a means through which children and citizens could love and obey the abstract and impersonal law even more implicitly by imagining that its power somehow originated in their own opinions and acts, further legitimizing Locke’s account of the citizen’s consent to government. In this way, children’s reading became a vital act of citizenly recognition (or, perhaps more precisely, misrecognition) of the state’s foundation in “the people.”

**Innovations in Teaching Love and Literacy: Embodied Letters and Bibliophagia**

The book’s role in teaching the child to love abstract authority was made possible by the inherent nature of language as both a physical system of signs and an abstract system of signification. In books teaching reading, language is necessarily understood as a group of letters on a page as well as a group of symbols for signifying abstract objects. Thus, language in children’s books actually links the concrete and abstract, connecting the child reader’s concrete world, full of objects upon which to lavish one’s affection, with the realm of law and nation. As the building blocks of language, the alphabetical letters are at once physical entities with their own shapes and representations of things and ideas that do not have an immanent physical presence. Eighteenth-century children’s books go to great lengths not only to make children able to recite their ABCs but to encourage readers to have affection for alphabetic characters and the books that contain them, as personal and intimate objects. To this end, they often emphasize the materiality
of letters, personifying them and giving them physical presence, not merely as letters on a page, but as material objects made of wood, metal, and even gingerbread. Transferring the child’s affection from more immanent objects like parents to physical embodiments of language prepares the child reader to transfer his or her affectionate feelings to abstract ideals such as laws. The eighteenth-century child reader is thus inducted into affection for abstract authority from the first moments of reading instruction: learning the ABCs.


In *The History of Little Goody Two Shoes*, the alphabet is cast as both physical object and as legal apparatus, with literacy instruction the perfect means to initiate children into affection for the latter. The book traces the education of an orphan girl named Margery Meanwell, who, over the course of the story, becomes Goody Two Shoes and begins to teach children herself. Referencing an eighteenth-century innovation claimed to have been “discovered” by authors as diverse as Maria Edgeworth and Samson Occum, Goody makes a set of wooden letters that the children can use as toys. In addition to giving readers a practical way to make reading a “game,” as Locke suggests, this action begins children’s training into a version of citizenship based on “free” and voluntary affection. Goody posits the letters as material objects, casting them as playthings that can be present in the child’s everyday existence, even as language necessarily refers to that which is absent and outside of it. These letters can be touched and held, making it easier for the child to transfer his or her affections to them.
Goody’s education of the child characters in the story converges with the instruction of the child reader, already adding a subtle level of abstraction. As Goody presents the children in the story with reading exercises to complete, such as spelling and pronunciation, child readers are given the same exercises. Rather than having actual wooden blocks themselves, the child readers have the book’s representation of those letters. For example, when Goody gives a child character a group of wooden letters to unscramble, the child reader finds the letters to unscramble printed in the book. Through this abstraction of what were, in the story, wooden letters to letters on a page, child readers are already inducted into a level of signification that is removed from immanent physical reality, preparing them to accept the mere idea of letters and things and, ultimately, the letter of the law. The task of unscrambling the letters into their correct alphabetical order further emphasizes the letters’ close connection with law and social order. The children put the letters in their correct order in the guise of a “game,” but they are also learning to order themselves according to an imposed structure of rule.

*Little Goody Two Shoes* goes on to demonstrate that the children’s initiation into affection for the letters as physical objects prepares them to love and obey the letters when they are later presented as abstract governing mechanisms. As teacher, Goody is not only the educator of children in the parish, but also a governing figure who is called to settle all private disputes. Fittingly, she does not keep the peace by force but by alphabetical law: whenever anyone is in a domestic dispute, she asks that the guilty parties say all of the letters of the alphabet before responding to each other. She explains that the letters, like the law, will keep order and will stifle individual passions in favor of the common good. Because Goody has done so well in teaching everyone to say their
ABCs with pleasure, people are willing cheerfully to abide by the alphabetical law. The ABCs occasion other reform as well. The narrator remarks that after being taught to read by Goody, the servants of the town stay out of the alehouses and begin to be more productive—an effect that resembles that of actual laws. Thus, by making children have affection for something abstract as if it were tangible and immanent, even elementary level children’s reading instruction prepares them to love and consent to absent and representative authority.

Another striking embodiment of language in eighteenth-century children’s literature comes in the form of what Patricia A. Crain has called “swallow letters,” or letters that can eat or be eaten. As an example of this motif, Crain cites the popular “A Apple Pye” rhyme that was found in children’s reading texts of the period from The Child’s New Play-Thing (1750) to Tom Thumb’s Play Book (1761): “A Apple pye / B bit it / C cut it” and so on. Crain claims that this rhyme animates the letters and allows the alphabet to “contain and regulate the passions.” This curious tendency to make letters and books into food leads to a number of descriptions of child readers as bibliophagi, a term that twentieth-century bibliophile Holbrook Jackson has used to describe readers who eat their books. In his Anatomy of Bibliomania, Jackson explains that book-eating is one of the most devoted forms of book-love:

I shall assemble many observations to show that books are food, libraries so many dishes of meat, served out for several palates, and that we eat them from love or necessity, as other foods, but most from love, and for that reason the bibliophagi may be ranked among the first of bibliophiles . . . for as James Thomas gives out, cannibals may be the only real lovers of their fellow-men, and on this basis the bibliophagi may be the best lovers of their fellow-books.
As a loving readerly activity, book-eating provides a perfect example of the conversion of physical affection for one’s book into love for abstract ideals, such as law. Seeing one’s book as food is the ultimate rendering of language, and the authority of law, as having an immanent, palpable, and even edible presence. At the same time, by way of the reader’s stomach, the book itself disappears, but its authority remains as an invisible guide and force for the truly affectionate reader.

The most famous of the eighteenth-century bibliophagi was a Newbery child character by the name of Giles Gingerbread (or, as he was known in some American editions, Tommy Gingerbread). The “history” of Giles Gingerbread is a tale of literacy education and book eating. It begins with “Old” Gaffer Gingerbread’s attempts to inspire a desire for reading in his son, Giles, by telling him about how the local squire Sir Toby came to power merely by “learning his book.” As Giles’ literacy attempts commence, however, it becomes clear that it is not enough for Giles simply to know his letters and book; the ideal child reader must have affection for books, similar to that which he or she would have for other physical objects. In the first scene of reading instruction in the text, Gaffer Gingerbread makes the entire alphabet of letters out of gingerbread so that Giles can learn to spell words with them, much like the children in *Little Goody Two Shoes*. Giles, however, is not very successful at this first attempt at ordering the letters correctly, which is also an entrance into the order of society. When his father asks him to spell “goose,” he spells it “guse.” At this, Gaffer becomes angry at his son and says, “You Blockhead, is that your manner of spelling?” Gaffer’s anger seems somewhat misplaced in a children’s reading book, especially given his playful presentation of the
gingerbread letters, but it clues the reader in to the actual purpose of his gingerbread reading instruction.

After an incident with some actual geese, who hiss at Giles because he cannot spell, Gaffer explains to Giles that he does not sufficiently “know” the letters and their sounds. A reader of the text might argue that Giles actually does know the letters and their sounds very well for someone who is a beginner to reading, as he spelled “goose” in a way that was phonetically correct. Gaffer’s complaint that Giles does not know his letters thus reveals that what is at stake is not simply knowing how to spell, but knowing the letters in a more intimate way. Gaffer makes Giles look at the letters very closely and speak to them as if they were personal friends: “Mr. B, I should be a Blockhead if I did not know you / C, C, C, I shall know you Mr. C indeed, and so will every Boy that loves custard.” This activity suggests that the true goal of literacy instruction is not proficiency, but affection, and even longing, for language. The book later says of its child character: “Giles Gingerbread, he lov’d cream, custard, and curds / And good books so well that he eat up his words.” Aside from being convenient to Gaffer as a gingerbread maker, the letters were made of gingerbread to tempt Giles into this affectionate relationship with language. It is only when he achieves this affectionate relationship that he is able to understand the order required by both spelling and law and to have a stake in reproducing it.

As a further means to entice Giles into loving his letters and his book intimately, Gaffer makes him an entire book out of gingerbread. At first, the book proves dangerous because it gives Giles the possibility not only of devouring his book, but of destroying it. Gaffer comes home one day to find that Giles has committed an even worse offense than
misspelling “goose”: he has eaten a corner of his book. But by reciting the part of the lesson he has eaten, Giles shows him that his eating of his book was not an unruly act, but a ritual that allowed him more fully to internalize its knowledge. In doing so, Giles enacts the very transaction that children’s books of the period encouraged. He has used his intimate and bodily relationship to his book to transfer his love and obedience to that which exists only in the abstract: a textual lesson. For him, the act of eating his book becomes akin to communion; rather than embodying God, the book as bread makes the authority of law and order present, manifest, and embodied. Eating the book through an excess of affection does not diminish its authority, but rather ensures that the eater will continue his or her affection for the text when it is no longer present. This process is summarized by a rhyme found at the story’s end: “See here’s Little Giles / With his Gingerbread Book, / For which he doth long / And at which he doth look, / Till by longing and looking, / He got it by Heart, / And then eats it up / As we eat up a tart.”

The rhyme, as an encapsulation of the story’s theme, demonstrates the strong links between desire and affection for books and internalization of the story’s lesson: getting the lesson “by heart.” It is the connection between feeling an affectionate longing for one’s book and the transfer of this affection to abstract ideals that allows the command “learn to love your book” to become inseparable from moral behavior and lawfulness. By eating his books, Giles becomes the ideal child reader: “Giles was so fond of his book and his Father gave him new ones every Day, all of which he ate up, so that it may be truly said, he lived upon Learning.”

“Living upon learning,” as established by the Sir Toby story at the beginning of the text, is a synonym for living rightly and following the law.
‘Love Makes for the Happiness of All Societies’: The School Story and the
Governess as Book

Eighteenth-century children’s books even more frequently linked the personal and public levels of national existence by translating the parent or governor into a text—making the book itself into a “portable parent.” This was, in many ways, the opposite strategy from the ABC books: instead of making abstract linguistic signs concrete and lovable, it made parental figures abstract and textual. Narrators, storytellers, characters, and authors appear as loving parents, friends, or family members, a motif that is part of a pervasive cultural attempt to gain the child’s affection for new modes of authority that were inherently representative and textual. In the remainder of this chapter, I examine the transfer of authority in Foster’s *The Boarding School* and its origin in Fielding’s *The Governess*, an English text that was read by the children of the early American republic. I choose *The Governess* specifically for its status as an ur-text of affectionate citizenship, in which explicit links between parental authority and textual law, and between freedom and subjection, begin to be established in the popular imagination. Through her account of a consenting community of affectionate readers, Fielding narrates the child reader’s acceptance of authority in increasingly abstract forms, forging the links between the personal and national that later texts, including *The Boarding School*, assume as facts of American existence. The juxtaposition of the two texts demonstrates the cultural continuity between the United States and Britain, as well as the American tendency towards political, if not always literary, exceptionalism. As the singularity of “the governess” vs. the plurality of “the boarding school” suggests, affectionate governance
was frequently assumed by English writers to be compatible with a one-ruler system, with its authority dispersed and constrained by parliament, while Americans considered affection an essential component of democracy and an illustration of their break from England. Print was a technology that could, and did, support both, making British texts and techniques easily adaptable by American writers to serve their own political ends.

*The Governess,* as its title suggests, is an extended meditation on governance, expressing in fiction many of the arguments about the child and citizen that Locke theorizes in *Two Treatises.* As the title also suggests, Fielding’s narrative takes as its ultimate expression of government the translation of tutor into text, the physical body of the teacher made into a book. The governess in question is Mrs. Teachum, a woman who has opened her home to nine female pupils after the death of her husband. While there was increasing pressure in pedagogical works for parents to rear their own children, eighteenth-century children’s literature only rarely depicted an actual parent conducting education or care of children (Gaffer Gingerbread is an exception). Children’s books were filled with tutors, teachers, nurses, and aunts, affectionate governesses who were already a step removed from parents themselves, and who were thus suited to transfer the child reader’s love to the representative authority that books embodied.¹⁸⁹

Though Locke’s tutor was explicitly male, the feminization of authority here is not coincidental. The significance of the child’s affections in the narrative of free citizenship enabled women, particularly mothers and mother surrogates, to appear frequently as governing agents, crucial for transitioning the child’s love from maternal bodies to the nation itself.¹⁹⁰ As Linda K. Kerber has suggested, female “governess” figures, such as the “republican mother,” gained particular authority in early America.¹⁹¹
Of course, this authority was contingent upon the ultimate removal of power from parent to law. Accordingly, as *The Governess* progresses, Teachum becomes distant, representational, and abstract as an authority figure. Through Teachum’s increasingly mediated representation through another character, through stories told orally, and finally through written language, the child reader learns to love and obey abstract and incorporeal forms of power. Though this systematic disciplining of the child’s love is cast as necessary for the citizen’s freedom, *The Governess*, as a formative text in the production of the affectionate “free” citizen, is unable, and perhaps unwilling, to disguise the subjugation that is required in the child citizen’s consent to authority. As the text moves from a governess character to the printed text as “governess,” it emphasizes that each “free” act of consent entails wholesale submission and “loving” sacrifice of one’s individual desires for the good of the community. In this way, the gender of Teachum’s pupils is also significant; Fielding’s re-gendering of the Lockean citizen suggests that the exemplary affectionate citizen is, paradoxically, a non-citizen. Because affectionate citizenship establishes obedience of the law as its primary objective, relying on imaginary emotional attachments rather than demonstrable rights, the ideal subject need not enjoy the privileges that are usually associated with civic inclusion.

Mrs. Teachum resembles Locke’s affectionate tutor. Though she naturally creates “awe” in her scholars, she primarily governs through the giving and withholding of affection: “the Girls greatly feared to incur her Displeasure by disobeying her Commands, and were equally pleased by her Approbation, when they had done anything worth her commendation.” Despite Teachum’s purported ability to control her students through affection, however, the text begins prior to the children’s consent to her
governance, in a state that resembles what Locke calls the “state of war,” or pre-government human existence. The first chapter offers “an account of a fray,” in which the pupils of the school get into a violent, pigtail-pulling fight over who should have had the largest apple. The apple is an appropriate object of contention in this war because the fruit’s status as a biblical symbol of individual knowledge and power contrasts with the larger authority to which the girls as citizens must consent. In addition, the apple anticipates the turn from individual liberty, as well as from local cultures relying on oral or pictorial literacy, to the textual power of the state, in that the apple was one of the first concrete objects that was translated into text by children’s rhymes such as “A is for Apple” and “A Apple Pye.”

As preparation for the girls’ eventual progression to textual governance, Mrs. Teachum appears briefly to correct them herself, but from the moment of their consent to her control, her authority has already become representational. One of the girls, Jenny Peace, begins to stand in for Teachum as affectionate governess, and it is she who oversees the children’s submission to Teachum’s rule. This initial moment of consent, parallel to Locke’s in Two Treatises, emphasizes the role of affection in the citizen’s “peaceful” surrender of freedom for the good of society. When Jenny first enters the scene, each child character is interested solely in her own “natural freedom.” Through an appeal to sisterly love, Jenny is able to convince the girls to confess that their liberty is an obstacle to their mutual happiness and tearfully to accept obedience to Teachum:

Their Eyes, melting with Sorrow for their Faults, let fall some Drops, as Tokens of their Repentance: But, as soon as they could recover themselves to speak, they all with one Voice cried out, Indeed, Miss Jenny, we are Sorry for our Fault, and will follow your Advice; which we now see is owing to your Goodness.
The consolidation of the girls’ individual voices into one voice of consent to governance echoes the unanimous and willing social compact imagined by Locke, even as Fielding reveals the loss and restraint this compact entails for the individual subject. The children are becoming “citizens,” a term that implies both corporeal presence and representation of the abstract concept of the nation. Through its depiction of the peaceful resolution of the apple fight and the girls’ subsequent expressions of affection for each other, the text makes the argument that the sacrifice of individual liberty for the common good is an act that results from the child’s love and ultimately creates greater individual freedom. As Fielding writes in her preface, “love and affection . . . makes the happiness of all societies.” As the story continues, the characters accept Teachum’s governance in increasingly abstract forms, approximating the consent to law and training child readers to this consent.

Just as the children of the story add their consent to this lesson of loving subordination, the reader is meant to voice it as well; Fielding writes, “I depend on the Goodness of my little Readers, to acknowledge this to be true.” This interpolation of the reader, found in the preface, is the first attempt to assimilate the individual child reader into a community of loving readers, who will both produce and symbolize a populace who has unanimously consented to governance. Notably, the dialogue between Jenny and the other girls is formatted in a similar way to the catechistic question and answer format discussed in chapter one, with similarly scripted answers to seemingly genuine questions. Many eighteenth-century children’s books used dialogue as a way to co-opt the reader’s voice and to create a fiction of his or her consent to the text’s authority. The child reader presumably follows the child characters in gradually accepting
Jenny’s view—and joins her own consent to governance to their “one voice.” This idea of children and readers speaking in “one voice” as a response to authority is not unique to this text, but is found in multiple school stories of the period. Though it was a common practice in the period to have pupils speak and read in unison in the classroom, the motif of children having “one voice” seems to go beyond a mere depiction of reality. Teachers likely had children read together in the classroom for the same reason that children’s book authors frequently depicted a univocal group of child characters. This motif stems from the eighteenth-century’s intense interest, explored by Locke and others, in the process by which the individual’s “free” consent to governance and entrance into citizenship makes one voice out of many.199

In the next section of The Governess, Jenny reinforces the children’s decision to give up their liberties out of love for their society by telling a fairy tale called “The Story of the Cruel Giant Barbarico, and the Good Giant Benefico.” This tale is a parable of governance, akin to Locke’s account of the formation of society. By telling it to the children, Jenny accomplishes two important purposes. Through the form of her story, she incorporates and revises the primarily oral-based literacy tradition of the fairy tale, simultaneously merging oral and textual literacy and promoting the ascendancy of the latter. Through its content, she inculcates that subjection to government is based on affection rather than on force or enslavement.200 In the story, there are two giant rulers with very different approaches to governing. Barbarico, the cruel giant, governs through “Fear and Astonishment” so that “the whole Country . . . trembled” at the sound of his groans.201 The other giant, Benefico, constantly carries out “acts of Goodness and Benevolence,” which make everyone love and obey him. Over the course of the story, the
“savage Tyrant” Barbarico wreaks havoc on two “citizens” and lovers, Amata and Fidus. In the end, with the help of an enslaved dwarf named Mignon, the two bring the tyrant to justice and elect Benefico as leader. As “their Governor, their Father, and their Kind Protector,” Benefico represents the links that affectionate governance creates between family and political rule and demonstrates the ways in which affection can be used to legitimize various constraints upon the citizen’s freedom. While Benefico’s affectionate form of authority leads to a public proclamation of freedom, it is contingent on banishing the kinds of individual passions and desires that Barbarico embodied: “Peace, Harmony and Love reigned in every Bosom; Dissension, Discord, and Hatred were banished from this friendly Dwelling.” The story is meant to convince children that such constraints can actually provide greater liberty, as long as they are founded on a principle of affection.

To prevent child readers of the story from missing the story’s important lesson about governance, Jenny Peace spends the next day making sure the interpretations of her listeners (and also therefore of the book’s readers) conform to the story’s moral. She explains, as Mrs. Teachum has instructed her, that the story was supposed to reinforce the lesson that the children have lately learned about suppressing their desires for the good of their little society. Notably, Jenny does hint at a necessary side-effect of making power abstract, suggesting that the children can become authorities themselves: “whenever you have any Power, you must follow the example of Benefico, and do Good with it.” Nonetheless, the text soon reveals that the most significant lesson of the story is that each child (and citizen) must submit herself to proper authority. On the same day that they discuss the story of the giants, the girls encounter a situation where they must apply their
newfound knowledge about affectionate governance specifically to the care of children. They witness a neighbor woman beating her child “so severely, that it was no Wonder her Cries had reached their Arbour.” Based on their reading of Barbarico’s cruel governance, they realize that the woman’s actions are not consistent with an idea of the “free” citizen and child, even though the woman claims that the child is being beaten for lying. Rather than accepting this punishment as a consequence of the girl’s bad behavior, they stage a mini-protest against tyrannical authority by begging for the naughty child’s pardon. Despite this, the discussion soon turns to the effects of lying, which they agree must be punished or prevented for the good of all citizens. Miss Dolly Friendly tells the story of how she always hid her little sister’s lies and faults, but, rather than promoting the child’s freedom and happiness, this indulgence led to her sister’s misery and eventually, to her death. Through Dolly’s story, Fielding maintains that strong governance is necessary to keep the children from indulging their passions.

Once they have been convinced of the relative freedom that comes from affectionate obedience, the children must consent to Teachum’s governance at a greater level of abstraction. After telling the first story of “Barbarico and Benefico,” Jenny comes with another story to read and asks for their consent to hear it. The children voice their willingness to hear the story in a way that echoes their first unanimous social compact, demonstrating that their “free” consent has become trained and habitual: “It was the Custom now so much amongst them to assent to any Proposal that came from Miss Jenny, that they all with one voice desired her to read it.” Through this second social compact, the children’s submission to Teachum’s authority becomes a submission to narrative. While the tales are still embodied, as they are told orally by Jenny, this is a
necessary intermediary move which will prepare the children to love and obey
governance that is incorporeal. With this new step, the subjection that “free” consent
entails becomes simultaneously more automatic and transparent. The new story, “The
Princess Hebe,” places an even greater emphasis than did “Barbarico and Benefico” on
the need for children to give wholesale obedience to authorities such as Teachum.

Like the story of the giants, “The Princess Hebe” begins with a power struggle
between two potential rulers. The king Abdallah is a benevolent ruler so “beloved in his
Subjects” and “quiet in his Dominions” that his commands are always cheerfully obeyed
and his force is rarely felt.207 When Abdallah dies, his power-hungry and passionate
sister-in-law Tropo designs for her husband Abdulham to take the throne, disinheriting
the young Princess Hebe. As Tropo has “inflam’d” Abdulham’s passions, the reader can
conjecture that he will be the opposite of his brother—and more like the giant Barbarico.
King Abdulham does not attempt to harm Hebe physically, as we might expect in a more
traditional fairy tale, but he has become potentially even more dangerous by early
American standards: he has threatened to take over her education. Princess Hebe and her
mother Rousignon escape to the house of a fairy named Sybella, who, though occupying
an enchanted forest seemingly removed from the domain of political governance, teaches
Hebe more “proper” lessons about citizenship than the tyrannical and usurping Abdulham
can provide. Sybella’s program of education, much like that of Mrs. Teachum and Jenny
Peace, focuses on denying one’s individual desires and submitting wholeheartedly to
authority. Queen Rousignon, Hebe’s mother, is the first to learn to suppress her passions,
following a trajectory much like that of the children in The Governess. When she arrives
at Sybella’s house, the Queen is overcome by her desires because she wants Hebe to have
the throne. Gradually, through example, Sybella shows Rousignon that Hebe will be happier if she dismisses her desires in favor of quiet submission and resignation. Once she has come to this conclusion, Rousignon, like the girls at Mrs. Teachum’s school, gets to hear a story, in which Sybella highlights the dangers of both the passions and of misplaced power. The story is about Sybella’s mother, a woman so beautiful that she has absolute power over her husband and is able to obtain almost anything she desires. Sybella emphasizes that her mother’s ability to achieve her desires does not lead to happiness but only makes the entire family miserable.

After she has told the story, Sybella makes it clear that the story is not simply a warning against the passions, but against reversals of the power dynamic. Her mother, like the sister-in-law Tropo, causes misery by claiming her own power when she should offer submission to her husband instead. Sybella explains that her own education was based on such submission; her father “instructed . . . that it was my Duty to pay him the most strict Obedience.” Because Rousignon has now conquered her “raging passions,” Sybella tells her that she can offer Hebe any gift in her power. Rather than asking for Hebe’s return to the throne, Rousignon asks that Hebe be given the gift of wisdom, which Sybella tellingly translates into obedience. She grants the wish, not by giving Hebe any power, but by telling her that she must obey her mother in every particular. In doing so, she reiterates that those being ruled (whether children, wives, or subjects) should submit themselves fully to authority, without trying to usurp control: “True Obedience . . . consists in Submission; and when we pretend to choose what Commands are proper and fit for us, we don’t obey, but set up our own Wisdom in opposition to our Governors.”
“The Princess Hebe” suggests that such complete submission to governance is desirable: when Hebe disobeys her mother, even in a seemingly benevolent act, it leads her to misery and pain.\(^{210}\) Like Locke’s free citizen who must submit to the law, Hebe can only be “free” when she submits fully to her mother’s commands. While the story is being told, the child listeners are asked to follow this lesson as well. Mrs. Teachum constantly interrupts the story to have them carry out other duties (interrupting the child reader’s experience of the story as well). While they would rather keep listening to the story, they must “cheerfully” follow her commands before they can learn what will happen to Princess Hebe.

The remainder of *The Governess* cements the need for children to consent to the lessons of their books, suggesting that texts can act as governing mechanisms when authority figures are absent. At the end of the story, Jenny Peace has to leave school to live with her aunt, but her influence at the school remains in the form of her story:

> All Quarrels and Contentions were banished . . . and if any such Thing was likely to arise, the Story of Miss Jenny Peace reconciling all her little Companions was told to them; so that Miss Jenny, tho’ absent, still seemed (by the bright Example which she left behind her) to be the Cement of Union and Harmony in this well-regulated Society.\(^{211}\)

Unlike in the storytelling scenes, where the girls’ consent to the texts of the stories is accompanied by Jenny’s physical presence, this final story, told in Jenny’s letters to the girls, entails a complete translation of Jenny’s (and Teachum’s) authority into text. From Jenny’s manuscripts, it does not take much to realize the method through which the child reader of *The Governess* has been governed all along. In addition to the multiple “governesses” within the text, the book itself is “governess.” Loving this textual
“governess” prepares child readers for their subjection to and love for the ultimate abstract authorities: the nation and its laws.

The success of Fielding’s strategy for initiating child readers into affectionate citizenship is evidenced by her influence in both England and America. In particular, Foster’s *The Boarding School*, a follow up to her best-selling novel *The Coquette* (1797), reinforces the process of citizenship training found in *The Governess*, while simultaneously rewriting Fielding’s narrative to fit the American political context. The premise of the text, slightly different from that of *The Governess*, is that all of the young pupils will be leaving the school to enter into the world and will no longer have their governess, Mrs. Williams, to help them behave correctly. Thus, Williams gives the students a final set of lessons to take away with them. The lessons are not simply rules for the children to follow, but steps to prepare the children to transfer their obedience of Williams to abstract representations of authority. Like Teachum and Jenny, Williams trains the children to obey her authority in the form of narrative, and later, of text. In addition to making her own authority incorporeal, Williams confers authority onto the girls (in other words into “the people”) themselves, who will enact governance after the lessons are over. In this way, Foster imagines an even more decentralized and abstract version of power than does Fielding, approximating the ways in which, in the republican system, the government’s power stems from the people.

In doing so, Foster addresses a key issue in early American politics. While the American political system was founded on the notion of government “by the people, for the people,” how the people would be represented was a matter of much debate among
early politicians and pundits. Central to these discussions was a fundamental question: if the people could not all be literally represented in government, as in a true democracy, how would citizens recognize the state’s power as their own? This question was all the more pressing for American authors because the moment of original “consent” to government, carried out by men claiming to represent “the people,” remained in living memory. While voting resolved the issue of the state’s legitimacy for a limited number of male citizens, the vote was, for many, an insufficient assurance that their needs would be addressed by the elected government. The emotional legitimacy of the state’s claim to represent the people thus required that the people embrace the abstract language of laws and political expression as somehow personally motivated and shaped. This affectionate attachment did not necessitate that citizens possess civil liberties, only that they submit peacefully, lovingly, and voluntarily to the law. Foster’s text legitimizes the forefathers’ notion that “the people” are the nation’s governors by teaching children to read abstract and textual power as personal, stemming from their parents, their friends, and even from themselves. Thus while previous studies of The Boarding School have focused on the girls as authors, demonstrating the ways in which they possess a kind of political agency, I suggest that the text lends children equal or greater significance as readers. What results from this blurring of authorship of the law and readerly recognition is a much more seamless relationship between personal relationships and abstract political representation, as well as between the citizen’s freedom and the child’s subjection, than found in The Governess.

The text nonetheless begins, much like Fielding’s text, with Williams’s attempts to make her own authority incorporeal. The first instance of abstracted authority comes at
the beginning of the story, with a description of Mrs. Williams’s strategies for governing at breakfast. Foster explains:

On these occasions, Mrs. Williams suspended the authority of the matron, that, by accustoming her pupils to familiarity in her presence they might be free from restraint, and feeling perfectly easy and unawed, appear in their genuine characters. By this she had an opportunity of observing any indecorum of behaviour . . . which she kept in mind, till a proper time to mention.213

This passage shows that Williams works by a system very similar to Locke’s; the children have the feeling that they are “free from restraint” while they are actually being monitored and directed. But the most important function of Williams’s breakfast activities is that they set up a subtle distinction between Williams’s physical presence and her capacity as governing body. At the same time that Williams acts as an extension of authority by personally remembering the children’s faults, she attempts to illustrate the notion that authority can be separated from her person and made abstract. Through its depiction of Williams’s breakfast practices, the text puts forward the following logic: if Williams can appear at breakfast “without the authority of a matron,” her authority can appear later without her body there to support it. This, indeed, is the lesson of the rest of the text. The girls are leaving the school to begin lives away from Williams, but they must still be directed by her lessons and the laws that will supplement her teachings. Williams tells her pupils: “Think not, then, that your emancipation from schools, gives you the liberty to neglect the advantages which you have received from them.”214 This moment replicates Locke’s crucial moment when the child supposedly becomes “free” from his or her guardians, but here, as in his system, “freedom” still entails constraint.

Even so, The Boarding School hides this constraint to a greater degree than does the The Governess. What was a “tearful” consent in Fielding’s English text is already, in
America, an affectionate one: “With one voice, [the children] most affectionately assured
Mrs. Williams, that it should be their daily study to profit by her lessons.” The contrast
between this passage and the consent passage in The Governess suggests that American
children’s books work harder to establish affectionate subjection as freedom. As a result,
abstract political authority becomes even more closely associated with personal
experience and feelings than ever before, making it possible to imagine that the power of
the state originates in common citizens and even children. As the rest of the text
demonstrates, the “one voice” not only declares the children’s allegiance to Williams, but
enacts their formation into a sovereign “people,” a mini-nation of citizens who are
presumably now prepared to govern themselves. The girls, as “the people,” embody the
ideal of representative citizenship. Though their governance is grounded in domestic and
personal relationships, it is not based on face-to-face political exchanges, but instead
expresses itself through textual mediation—specifically, through letters. In this way, the
girls practice what Warner calls, the “principle of negativity,” in which government is
“not an interaction between particularized persons, but among persons constituted by the
negating abstraction of themselves.” They must remove the authority of “the people”
from their personal and physical forms and center it in text. By narrating this process by
which the people’s authority becomes textual, The Boarding School further reinforces the
imagined links between the personal and political, training child readers to recognize and
proclaim affection for abstract civic laws and constraints as the embodiment of their own
opinions and desires.

Williams prepares the girls to make personal authority abstract by using a
technique similar to that of Jenny Peace in The Governess: telling stories. This technique
has two seemingly contrasting effects, which highlight the double requirement of early American political action and expression to represent the people, but to represent them as non-particularized. First, the stories cast the authority of Williams’ story not in her own personal experience or prejudices but in a more abstract and textual authority. At the same time, they locate authority in the stories of dozens of other “citizens,” who alone are merely individuals with tragic tales, but who together represent a veritable constitution of rules, rooted in the experiences and concerns of the people. For example, one story, about a young woman named Camilla, shows the need for people to regulate their tempers and passions, a lesson that has a benefit to society as a whole. For Williams, such rules of behavior function as laws: “Your behavior and conversation must be uniformly governed by the laws of politeness, discretion, and decorum.” The stories convey that such laws do not come from a particular person, but from a larger “consensus” of popular opinion that represents all citizens, including her child listeners. Williams’s directions for reading further substantiate this point. In her discussion of novels, she asserts that “Those [books], which are sanctioned by the general voice of delicacy and refinement, may be allowed a reading.” Notably, in this passage, the “one voice” of citizenship returns, but here the citizens are not consenting to be governed, but actually carrying out the governing. Yet, as with the voice of consenting citizenship, the individual members of the community who make up the “general voice” have been absorbed. The voice appears to be stemming, not from particular persons, but from the abstract concepts of “delicacy and refinement.” These distinctions are significant, because when the girls are formed into a “people” who will govern themselves, they must love and obey their own governance as abstract and incorporeal.
As Williams’s emphasis on reading hints, the eventual conferral of authority on the children necessitates a further move from orality (telling stories) to textuality. Williams initiates this progression by emphasizing that the best authority is found in the textual representation rather than in any one person. For example, she lauds poetry because it “meliorate[s] the affections,” books by “monitors” or teachers because they regulate conduct, and history because it helps one to govern one’s manners. Williams’ lessons on books again remind us of the mechanism through which the child reader of *The Boarding School* is already being governed. American children, in reading Foster’s text, are already removed from the Williams’ presence and the authority therein is thus already representative, abstract, and textual. Later in the text, when Williams responds to an inquiry from one of the girls about marriage with the suggestion that she read a book instead, she is insisting on the need to follow textual authority as the best expression of parental advice.

These reading lessons ultimately prepare the children to receive, recognize, and embrace textual authority as stemming from the experience, values, and beliefs of the people. Borrowing from *The Governess*, Foster demonstrates that a particularly effective technology through which this recognition can be learned is correspondence, which, like the children’s book, is a textual form that relies on a fantasy of embodiment. After Williams finishes giving her lectures and the girls leave for their respective homes, they write letters to each other, a selection of which constitutes the remainder of the *The Boarding School*. Providing a bridge between the presence and absence of the author, these letters train the child reader to accept popular authority in the distanced form in which it appears in American government and to love it and obey it as if it were coming
from one’s most trusted parent, friend, mentor, and, ultimately, from oneself. While the children’s missives are personal in that they are ascribed to particular child authors, they emphasize abstract lessons, making these lessons appear to originate in the people.

Several of the children draw this very connection in the content of the letters themselves, offering their own theories about how the presumably personal form of the letter can signify larger political ideals and laws. Criticizing letter collections by popular authors from France and England respectively, the children argue that letters must contain something to engage the affections and turn them towards virtue, but they must go beyond personal or “local” musings to contain universal and abstract “rules” of decorum. Two of the child characters, Caroline and Cleora, discuss Marie de Rabutin-Chantal de Sévigné’s Letters from the Marchioness de Sevigne to Her Daughter the Countess de Grignan (1768). Caroline critiques de Sévigné for making her letters too personal and for not containing enough general principles. She had heard that the letters were “standards of taste and elegance,” but found instead that they were composed of “local circumstances” and “family matters . . . many of which are of too trifling a nature.”220 Because de Sévigné focuses so much on “trifling” local activities, her writing cannot be recognized as the authoritative language of the law. Later, Caroline enters into another exchange, this time with Sophia, in which the proper function of letters is defined. Sophia writes to Caroline about the Reverend John Bennett’s Letters to a Young Lady (1791), which she claims “are not scholastic and elaborate dissertations; they are addressed to the heart; they are the native language of affection: they can hardly fail to instill the love of virtue into every mind susceptible of its charms.”221 These letters differ from those of de Sévigné because, while they contain enough of the personal and
concrete to engage the affections, they allow readers to transfer their love to an intangible concept: virtue. Thus, these letters are particularly appropriate to train the child citizen; Sophia recommends that Caroline read them at least twice. This re-reading typifies the work that must be done by the affectionate citizen in recognizing the power of the people embodied in text.

The girls’ letters, on the whole, resemble Bennett’s. While it is possible to distinguish some of the members of this letter-writing community by sketchily-drawn personality traits—Maria Williams writes poetry in her letters, Harriot can be particularly sermon-esque in her moralizing, Caroline and Cleora take a particular interest in books—the child characters tend to take on a voice of authority that is mostly disconnected from personal experience or opinions. The child authors cannot be easily distinguished, nor can their univocality be differentiated from the voice that Williams assumed in her earlier lectures. In addition, there is no narrative semblance in the letters to establish the personal identities or stories of the characters. Though the letters represent a version of authority that is removed from particular persons, the form of the letter makes it appear as if this authority comes from the children themselves. The children’s authority, like their freedom, is an imaginary ideal perpetuated by the text. Though the letters purport to represent the people’s authority, they actually originate from the same source as Williams’s lectures: Foster herself. Seen in the context of affectionate citizenship, the most important function of the letter section is to teach children to read generalized expressions of citizenship and public opinion as representing the voices of those they love and, indeed, as their own voices. This affectionate recognition through reading represents the ultimate equation of the personal and political and of freedom and
The importance of the child’s affections in bolstering the often celebrated notion of American political participation demonstrates the extent to which the child’s and citizen’s freedom are inextricably linked. On the one hand, the notion that children and citizens were governed by the presumably voluntary attachments of affection became a way to solidify the notion of the emancipated child and the free citizen. At the same time, children were being trained through their affectionate reading practices into a very limited sense of liberty based on submission. These deep connections between the personal and political reveal the ultimate inseparability of Warner’s public concept of citizenship and Berlant’s private, domestic one. The legitimacy of the nation’s power relied upon the associations between personal feeling and abstract law that were forged by early American reading practices. The foremost significance of what I have termed affectionate readership and citizenship is that these practices inaugurated an entire history of infantile citizenship in America, creating ways to keep citizens “childish” even into adulthood.

This comparison between citizens and children has henceforth become one of the primary anxieties about the citizen. While eighteenth-century children’s books often concealed the citizen’s “childishness” through appeals to their freedom, the links between the child and citizen would come to be revealed in early American novels, such as William Hill Brown’s *The Power of Sympathy* (1789), Tabitha Gilman Tenney’s *Female Quixotism* (1801), and Leonora Sansay’s *Laura* (1809), which take the unstable and often
impassable transition from childhood to adulthood as their central theme. These later
texts begin to probe the connections between freedom and subjection established in the
texts that I have analyzed here, though, as we will see in the next chapter, they often
preserved the early American equation between the two terms. Arguably, many of these
tensions between children and citizens have remained a crucial part of the political
landscape, informing issues of the citizen’s rights and agency, as well as questions about
the role of affections and love for one’s country in political participation. Seen in this
light, the political and pedagogical works of early America began one of the nation’s
most lasting preoccupations: the simultaneous fantasy and fear that American citizenship
might be naïve, immature, and juvenile at its heart.
CHAPTER 3

READERS WHO LOVE TOO MUCH: THE EARLY AMERICAN NOVEL AND THE CHILDISH CITIZEN

In Susanna Rowson’s *Mentoria; or the Young Lady’s Friend* (1794), the title character hints that the command for children to “love their books” has the dangerous side effect of making reading a passionate act. While Mentoria uses letters and stories to entice her charges to obey her own textual governance, she becomes deeply critical of another “alluring” form with a similar mode of dissemination: the novel. Mentoria’s criticism of novels was not uncommon: in the final decades of the eighteenth century, these texts emerged as the dangerous competitors of didactic children’s books such as *The Governess* (1749) and *The Boarding School* (1798). Mentoria illustrates the dangers of novels by telling the story of Dorcas, who is made the mistress of a gentleman because she allows herself to be influenced by romances, and of her daughter Marion, who, under her mother’s influence, accepts love letters from gentlemen and eventually dies as a prostitute. As the treachery of texts suggests, the danger is a function of print itself: when authority becomes abstract, associated with language rather than a concrete figure, there
is the potential for any skilled writer to pose as an authority, including the rake, the hedonist, and the political subversive.

Because of the perceived importance of affectionate citizenship to liberty, the notion of competing textual influences gained particular importance in the early republic, particularly in the turbulent years of the French Revolution. Politicians feared that children might easily learn to love bad authorities, and even other countries, more than the nation and its laws. To illustrate this point, both Benjamin Rush and Noah Webster tell the story of the Lacadamonians. In this political allegory, the citizens of Lacademonia are in debt to another nation and are asked to offer child hostages as collateral. While the terms of the contract allow the children to remain Lacadamonian citizens and to be released upon its fulfillment, these “wise republicans” refuse to give up their children. Instead, they offer twice the number of adult citizens, reasoning that these grown-up citizens’ “habits and prejudices could not be shaken by residing in a foreign country.”

While the children, even as hostages, would have retained their citizenship status, this nominal allegiance is not enough. They must have affection for Lacademonia that is voluntary and consistent with their natural freedom, a process that requires repeated contact. With the rise of the printed text, the worst fear of the Lacadamonians, that the fickle child citizen might love other laws and other lands, no longer required that the child be taken hostage. Bad authorities, it was supposed, could enter child readers’ hearts through the very medium that trained their affection to receive the good ones, causing them to refuse their love and consent to the established laws of national conduct.

Unpracticed as readers, children were thought to be particularly susceptible to textual manipulation. Mentoria’s Dorcas traces her downfall to her early encounters with
“bad” books: “Countess’s library [included] several novels . . . these books served to
soften my mind and encrease my passion, so that by never attempting to repel it in its first
approach, it in time gained an entire ascendancy over my heart.”

Because of the child’s vulnerability to treacherous books, a powerful and lasting image of childhood began to emerge: “the bad child reader,” a curious figure whose failing seems to be that she has
both too much agency and not enough. This bad reader was not a child who could not
read or who had no interest in books, but rather a reader who loved the wrong books to
the point of captivation, while simultaneously rebelling against the accepted narratives of
social behavior. This category of bad child reader came to refer not only to children in the
developmental sense, but to a range of readers who were associated metaphorically with
“childishness,” a term that perfectly signifies both the unruliness and vulnerability that
the bad reader came to embody.

Because they relied on the child’s imagination of far-off characters, places, and
scenes, novels and fictional texts were considered to be the particular objects of the bad
child reader’s love, leading pedagogues to exhibit a conflicting attitude toward fiction
and affection. The apparent rejection of fiction by a number of early American writers
has caused scholars such as Cathy Davidson to argue that the novel genre inherently
lends itself to spreading revolutionary ideas. This interpretation becomes less
convincing, however, when we notice that novelists themselves are primarily responsible
for creating and perpetuating narratives of bad fiction, bad readership, and seductive
authority in America. Oddly, in spite of the potential danger of romantic stories, Mentoria
gives the children a large collection of love letters (not included for the reader’s perusal),
which she calls “a school for lovers.” It seems odd that a presumably well-meaning
governess would give her young charges what she sees as the most dangerous kind of reading that a young girl can have, an observation substantiated by her decision not to make the letters available for Rowson’s actual child reader. Yet, this strategy demonstrates symbolically the many ways in which bad reading, rather than an external threat, was always *internal* to the project of creating affectionate citizens. Scholars of early American literature have often found that it is difficult to locate examples of actual bad novels in early America, whereas self-proclaimed “good” novels in which child characters have been seduced by the bad novels are plentiful. This evidence suggests that early American writers, far from rejecting novels, created fictional accounts of bad readers to remedy the problems that their *own* dependence on textual governance had occasioned.

Children were already in an apt position to play the role of bad readers. As I have argued, child readers came to bear the burden of symbolizing, enacting, and reproducing the citizen’s apparent freedom through their love for books. But the child was also an often-invoked foil to the free citizen, necessary to mark the citizen’s emancipation from childish constraint. In Locke’s work in particular, children were not only “freemen” from birth, but were also subjected dependants. This double status of the child in the modern narrative of citizenship explains why we see, in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century public imagination, images of children as romantic free spirits, little patriots, and motivated do-gooders, along with portraits of docile pupils, impoverished urchins, and abused dependents. Even as childhood came to signify a time of freedom and voluntary affection, children remained symbols of inequality and restriction, an image strengthened by their natural, irremovable limitations and their often meager circumstances. Despite
images of the child’s consent to government in children’s books, children also remained not-yet-citizens, considered unable to take part in citizenship because of their natural submission to their parents and other authority figures. As was the case with Dorcas and Marion, this submissive status made them vulnerable to narrative seduction. At the other extreme, the fear remained that they might turn out to be anti-citizens, “little tyrants” who might rebel or otherwise disrupt the production of loving citizens. From this perspective, child readers were potentially resistant readers, fiercely loyal to their books, but reluctant to submit to social narratives. As bad readers in both of these ways, children took on the important function of representing the citizen’s “other.” Because childhood was deemed temporary, it simultaneously allowed for the expression and immediate eradication of this otherness. By creating narratives in which these bad child readers grew up to be good citizens and readers, authors could attempt to erase the specter of subjection and the potential for rebellion that always threatened the formation of free citizens.

Yet, as this double signification of the bad child reader may suggest, categories such as adult/child, good/bad, and subjection/rebellion become further complicated around the figure of the bad child reader. While bad reading prevents readers from “growing up,” dooming them to a life of perpetual childhood even after they have physically matured, adult citizenship is in many ways contingent upon continuing to identify oneself as a good “child” by consenting to be governed by good books. Novels rely on a bildungsroman narrative that enacts the child’s maturation, while simultaneously preserving the reader’s childishness and even turning adult readers into “children.” The categories of subjection and rebellion likewise remain entangled. By associating rebellion with subjected childhood and “bad reading,” novelists mark all acts
of resistance as results of dependence, seduction, or civic illiteracy, imaginatively foreclosing the possibility for a rebellious adult citizen. As voluntary rebellion becomes indistinguishable from subjection to the “wrong” authority figures, subjection to the right authority figures can continue to be defined as “freedom.” Further, overt acts of subjugation, such as kidnapping the child reader and forcing her to read the “right” books, can be deemed necessary for the child’s protection and ultimate liberty. In this way, the projection of subjection and rebellion onto the bad child reader in early American novels works simultaneously to mask and reveal the limitations of readership as an instrument of empowerment.

‘How Dangerous is the Company of Books’: The Bad Child Reader and the Perils of Readerly Seduction

While most scholars have assumed the novel to be an adult genre, early novels display an obsession with childhood and youth, residing in a liminal space that cannot be said to be quite adult. A quick glance at the prefaces of several eighteenth-century novels demonstrates that they were frequently dedicated to child readers, often but not always of the female sex. Samuel Richardson’s Pamela (1740), sometimes designated the first English novel, insists that it is designed to “cultivate the principles of virtue and religion in the minds of the youth of both sexes.” The first American novel, William Hill Brown’s The Power of Sympathy (1789) is dedicated to “the young ladies of Columbia.” The author of The History of Constantius and Pulchera (1794) imagines that the “daughters of Columbia” will be primarily responsible for circulating the work. Rowson’s Charlotte Temple (1794) even goes so far as to address the bad child reader directly in its
dedication to “the young and thoughtless of the fair sex.” To some degree, these
dedications are reflected in the genre’s actual readership. While novels were outsold by
children’s textbooks and primers, they circulated in relatively large numbers in the early
republic, suggesting that they reached a wide variety of readers. John Tebbel ranks
*Pamela, Clarissa* (1748), *Tom Jones* (1749), *Charlotte Temple*, and *Vicar of Wakefield*
(1766) among his list of early American best-sellers, noting that these were “devoured”
by young men and women, as well as by “much younger children . . . if their parents
permitted.”227 Real life evidence of child novel readers exists; Catharine Maria
Sedgwick, born in 1789, remembers reading novels at age eight, child diarists such as
Abigail Lyman discussed their opinions of popular texts, and fan letters number children
among the readers of several eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels.228

But the genre’s preoccupation with childhood was not solely a function of its
readership. As a genre that was itself in its infancy, the novel appeals to childhood as a
way to create the conditions for its own importance, first generating and then claiming to
regulate bad child readers. Unlike the “good reader” stories discussed in chapter two,
novels foreground children’s immaturity and natural tendency toward relationships of
subjection, casting them in a deficient state of readership and citizenship that the novel
can then fill. Presumably reflecting novel readers, the heroes and heroines of these texts
themselves occupy this state, but with the possibility of transitioning into adulthood, a
potential represented most readily by adolescence. Pamela is fourteen years old for the
majority of her adventures, Brown’s hero Harrington is called a “juvenile hero” by his
twenty-two year old “senior” Worthy, Pulchera is sixteen years old, and Charlotte is
constantly referred to as a “child” and “girl.” By the logic of the genre, these young
characters give too much adoration and credence to their reading, while good “adult” readers are able to remain “free” because they are more distanced and “mature” in their encounters with texts. Unlike “good” readers, whose affections legitimize their voluntary subjection, these readers’ affections are seen as disqualifying them from free consent because they are coerced, influenced, seduced, or, in other words, “childish.” Novels regulate and restrict this volatile stage of readership by depicting their heroes’ and heroines’ transition from childhood to adult citizenship and by converting their actual readers to more “adult” reading habits. In narrating the “coming of age” of its characters and readers, the novel writes its own bildungsroman as a genre, claiming to provide a vital civic service. By protecting readers from childishness, novels even claim sympathy with liberatory and democratic aims.

The liberation from childhood did not require that readers actually be children; evidence suggests that novels were widely read by all readers, including women of all ages and even adult men.229 “Childishness” in this context does not refer only to age, but to a particular location within the pre-rational, subjected phase of Locke’s narrative of citizenship that makes one vulnerable to becoming a bad reader. Children become such familiar symbols for subjected or seduced readership that even allegedly bad readers of an advanced age, such as women, are depicted as puerile. Women readers became especially associated with bad child readers because they were thought to share children’s irrationality and lack of self-sufficiency. Perhaps out of a desire to disentangle women readers from children, critics have tended to understand these bad reader narratives, which often take the form of seduction novels, as being primarily about the potentials for sexual seduction facing the woman reader.230 Yet the hysteria surrounding bad reading
reflects not merely a cultural desire to preserve female virtue, but a discursive attempt to shore up national cultural and political legitimacy by writing away the potential for a subjected citizenship. The novel uses the bad reader as an attempt to regulate the boundary between childhood and adulthood, drawing a definitive border line between the subjected child and free citizen. The fact that child readers are so often addressed in novel prefaces is thus not merely a reflection of the genre’s actual readership, but a clue to the larger project of the novel itself.

Bad child readers are so inseparable from the novelistic project that they play a central role in what is often labeled the first American novel, Brown’s *The Power of Sympathy*. While most scholarly treatments of Brown’s novel have focused on the incestuous relationship between Harrington and Harriot, bad reading is, in many ways, an even more significant theme. The preface of *The Power of Sympathy* states that the purpose of the book is to counter the potential for bad reading with education:

> In Novels, which expose no particular Vice, and which recommend no particular Virtue, the fair Reader, though she may find amusement, must finish them without being impressed with any particular idea . . . Of the Letters before us, it is necessary to remark, that this error on each side has been avoided—the dangerous Consequences of Seduction are exposed, and the Advantages of Female Education set forth and recommended.231

While it is tempting to dismiss the educational missive of the text as a mere rationalization of its sensational content, it provides a way of understanding the less often examined segments of the text: the didactic letters from Mrs. Holmes. At a closer glance, these portions of the novel resemble the didactic texts described in chapter two, down to the character of the affectionate letter-writing governess. Like Jenny Peace or Mentoria, Mrs. Holmes governs the teenage Myra Harrington via her correspondence, which alone
makes up roughly one-third of the total content of the text. Worthy appears at times to be a similar character, offering his young charge Harrington educational wisdom that is meant to reform his behavior. Yet, while the children in chapter two easily and almost seamlessly become free and obedient citizens through the educational endeavors of their teachers, this process is much more labored and treacherous in *The Power of Sympathy*, reflecting a new concern with “bad” texts and authority figures, as well as the novel’s self-appointed role at correcting the child’s lack of discrimination.

Bad reading is first mentioned as a threat early in the text when Mrs. Holmes sends young Myra a lengthy record of a discussion about what kinds of books are appropriate for young readers, and more specifically, for the fourteen-year-old Miss Bourn. The conversation is broached by Miss Bourn’s mother, who is characterized as the successful product of good readerly education. In particular, she has obtained the monetary reward for literacy described in children’s books such as *Giles Gingerbread*:

> “Mrs. Bourn assumes a higher rank in life than she pretended seven years ago.—She then walked on foot—she now, by good fortune, rides in a chariot.”

Yet Mrs. Bourn is unsure that her daughter will be able to follow in her footsteps, presumably due to the overwhelming selection of books now available to child readers and the ease with which a bad authority might use novels to his or her own advantage. Mr. Holmes, Mrs. Holmes’ learned father-in-law, argues that books have become as important as traditional pedagogy and, while good books can create good citizens, bad ones can seduce readers into depravity:

> We wisely exclude those persons from our conversation, whose characters are bad, whose manners are depraved, or whose morals are impure; if they are excluded from an apprehension of contaminating our minds, how much more
dangerous is the company of those books where the strokes aimed at virtue are redoubled, and the poison of vice, by repeatedly reading the same thing, indelibly disdains the young mind?\textsuperscript{233}

Unlike the pedagogues in chapter two, Mr. Holmes argues that the power of books to represent reality is not necessarily an asset of literacy training, but a liability if placed in the wrong hands. Child readers can be victimized by their books because they are impressionable and vulnerable. Worthy declares that because children have little ability to resist, their reading choices must be restricted: “Unless a proper selection is made, one would do better never to read at all.”\textsuperscript{234} Mr. Holmes goes on to use the situation of a child reader, Miss Bourn, as an occasion to discuss all forms of impressionable and seduced readers: “Novels, not regulated on the chaste principles of true friendship, rational love, and connubial duty, appear to me totally unfit to form the minds of women, of friends, or of wives.”\textsuperscript{235} “Child” readers are defined not only by age, but by the degree to which they are subjected to and shaped by their books.

In contrast to these subjected readers, Mr. Holmes compares a good, “free,” and presumably “adult” reader to a river whose bank has grown high enough to control the currents of text: “if books, which are the sources that feed this river, rush into it from every quarter, it will overflow its banks, and the plain will become inundated . . . a river properly restricted by high banks, is necessarily progressive.”\textsuperscript{236} To come of age as a reader, the child must become this kind of discriminating reader:

There is a medium to be observed in a lady’s reading; she is not to receive every thing she finds, even in the best books, as invariable lessons of conduct . . . she ought, therefore, to discern with an eye of judgment, between the superficial and the penetrating—the elegant and the tawdry—what may be merely amusing, and what may be useful.\textsuperscript{237}
While the “lady” in this passage is both young and female, she is symbolically an adult reader due to her “eye of judgment” and can thus read freely. Even so, Mr. Holmes hints that what one reads is even more crucial to avoiding childish reading than how one reads it. Although his hysteria is so great that even the “best books” may still hide evil intentions, Holmes inculcates that becoming an adult reader is not contingent upon being free of all influence, but on learning to be influenced only by good, accepted narratives.

By arguing that both childhood and bad reading can be transcended through education, The Power of Sympathy suggests that subjection is fundamentally impermanent. Naturalizing and compartmentalizing this undesirable feature of citizenship by locating it in a transitory, and relatively brief, stage of life, novels thus work to distract readers from the limitations on all citizens’ and readers’ freedom, suggesting that restrictions are the temporary results of being a child and of reading bad novels. To keep the child’s limitations from spilling over into adult citizenship, the bad reader is expected to “grow up” to be a good reader. Novels thus rely on Locke’s transition from the subjected not-yet-citizen to the “free” adult citizen. As Locke explains it,

during his want of Understanding . . . some other must govern [the child] and be a Will to him, till he hath attained to a state of Freedom, and his Understanding be fit to take the Government of his Will.  

The novel’s work is, in part, to narrate the end of childhood for its characters and readers.

But even as bad readers mark the difference between children and adults (and the need for progression from one stage of life to the other), they simultaneously demonstrate the blurred and overlapping relationship between these two statuses. In the novel’s progressive narrative of citizenship, the child and the adult citizen are not complete opposites, but are positions that merge into each other. The boundary between childhood
and adulthood is notoriously unstable: a stage in which the production of good citizens might go awry. Seen in this second light, the application of “child” reader status even to readers who are not strictly children suggests that the novel troubles the boundary between adulthood and childhood, marking childhood’s actual expansiveness as a signifier of subjection. In addition to telling a story of the child’s “coming of age,” novels are truly “about” the indistinct relationship between adult citizens and children. An obsession with the precarious transition from child to adult is in fact constitutive of the genre, expressing itself most readily in the number of characters who remain childlike into adulthood or die without growing up.

Mr. Holmes himself makes it clear that the child’s coming of age is not guaranteed; if the child reader is not able to build her river banks high enough, her love for reading will enslave and ruin her instead of leading to her “free” and obedient acceptance of social norms. Though Miss Bourn protests that she never remembers what she reads anyway, Mr. Holmes suggests that bad reading can disrupt one’s chances to become a free adult reader, keeping one a “child” well beyond the appropriate age. To illustrate this point, he mentions the tragedy of a famous American bad child reader: Elizabeth Whitman. Whitman, who also appears in Hannah Webster Foster’s *The Coquette* (1797), notoriously met her downfall because she was a “great reader of novels and romances.” According to renditions of Whitman’s story in newspapers and sermons, her bad reading caused her to reject standards of female behavior, become seduced, and die alone in an inn. Though Whitman was thirty-five by the time she died, Brown’s portrayal of the famous bad reader casts her as an unsightly sort of adult-child, calling her a “young lady” and emphasizing her continued desire to play the youthful
coquette despite the gradual “decay” of “the roses of youth.” Foster, in her version of Whitman’s story, also depicts Eliza as childlike throughout the text, having just left her parents’ home. We find out at the end of The Coquette that the heroine is upwards of thirty, a fact that surprises most readers. Whitman’s childishness, then, is not literal but figurative, signifying the dependent vulnerability that allows her to be seduced.

According to the narrative of free citizenship, Whitman must be cast as a child and a bad reader, rather than a free adult citizen, due to her subjection to the misguided lessons of her books. Brown and Foster emphasize both the heroine’s victimization through seduction and her complicity with her own downfall through her rebellious acts. Brown in particular demonstrates the ease with which these two contrasting states of subjection and rebellion combine in the portrait of the bad child reader:

> having imbibed her ideas of the characters of men, from those fallacious sources, [she] became vain and coquettish, and rejected several offers of marriage . . . Disappointed in her Fairy hope . . . she was the more easily persuaded to relinquish that stability which is the honour and the happiness of the sex.

While on one hand Whitman is “coquettish” and actively rejects the social standards of marriage, she also passively “imbibes” incorrect opinions from books and is thus “persuaded” or seduced into acting wrongly. By virtue of her status as subjected bad “child” reader, any potential agency that Whitman may have exercised in living outside of societal norms is dissipated, while at the very same time, her “willful” rebellion justifies her eventual punishment. In the end, Whitman does not choose to become a good adult reader and thus dies as the inverse of the citizen, unable to “grow up” and be integrated into the progressive narrative of citizenship. Her death in The Coquette is notably accompanied by the deaths of several other children of the text, including Mrs.
Richman’s baby, Mrs. Sanford’s baby, and of course, her own child. Brown’s text also ends with the suicidal deaths of its two juvenile characters: Harrington and Harriot, creating a unified symbolism of children who never grow up. Both texts simultaneously bemoan the child’s inability to mature and are subtly implicated in their continued nonage; novels are simultaneously the books that correct bad reading and the books that bad readers read.

As this paradox suggests, novels are unable and even unwilling to hide what was actually a desirable overlap between child and adult readers, one that is ultimately encouraged by the passionate reading practices associated with novels. While the process of training loving citizens necessarily carries out a transition between these two positions, it also seeks to create a continuation of childhood affection and obedience into adulthood. As readers must subject themselves to the governance of good authority figures, Brown cannot help but reveal that “freedom” and “adulthood” also demand submission to one’s books. At an often overlooked moment in the text, Mrs. Holmes sends a book to Myra entitled *A Lady of Quality’s Advice to her Children*. Mrs. Holmes explains that she does not “recommend it to you as a Novel, but as a work that speaks the language of the heart and inculcates the duty we owe to ourselves, to society, and the Deity.”²⁴² From the title, the book does not sound like a novel, but a children’s pedagogical work that may or may not have used fiction as a device for gaining the child reader’s attention. By labeling the work “not a novel,” Mrs. Holmes protests perhaps a bit too much, actually drawing attention to the comparison between this supposedly “good” text and the bad novels that she and Mr. Holmes have denounced. Myra is clearly not supposed to shield herself from becoming “seduced” by this book but is expected to allow it to form her opinions and
actions, similar to the ways in which Whitman uses her novels. In contrast to Whitman’s novels, *A Lady of Quality’s Advice to Her Children* is “safe” to be followed because it represents a good authority, emphasized by the fact that she is “of quality,” but the mode of reading is not significantly different. The epitaph to *The Power of Sympathy* emphasizes that it too attempts to gain the child reader’s passionate allegiance: “Catch the warm Passions of the tender Youth / And win the Mind to Sentiment and Truth.”

As both works are addressed to young readers, the reader is asked to take on the position of a child regardless of her actual age. Childish reading, in this case, is exactly what is necessary to create and maintain the citizen’s obedience to the norms of society.

While this narrative of continued subjection remains more hidden than its bildungsroman twin, it is just as crucial as the progressive narrative in which the subjected child grows up into a free adult. Ideal citizens must be, in many ways, like subjected children, though their submission is no longer to parents but to law. Childishness is not the inverse of citizenship, but a desirable (if unspeakable) feature of it. Seen in this light, the overlap between child and adult readers, and particularly between children and women readers, begins to take on an added significance. As members of society who literally remained subjugated even after they had reached adulthood and who were not often able to exercise rights or freedoms, women were ideal examples of childish citizenship. Women’s status as political “children” explains why many early American novels are addressed to young ladies, even though they were read by a variety of readers. As not all readers of the novel are children, the novel encourages readers to occupy imaginatively the position of “child” reader, preserving their childlike dependence, affection and vulnerability each time they open their books. Novels’ ability
to change child readers into adults and adult readers into children, even as their typically progressive and educative plots rely upon a clear distinction between these categories, points to the instability of age distinctions in the novel’s narrative of modern citizenship. While they often begin as children, the heroes and heroines of these texts almost always become adults, but they also frequently occupy both positions at once, emblematizing the ways in which the child both is and is not a citizen, as well as the ways in which the bad child reader both reveals and contains the importance of “childishness” to the construction of citizenship.

As a result, Americans have historically had to defend themselves from the accusation that they are naïve, immature, and juvenile in their expression of citizenship. One of the specific ways America’s juvenile reputation was represented in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was through depictions of Americans as bad readers. This instability between adult and child creates a situation in which the citizen can continually be labeled a “child,” undermining and infantilizing the American national project. Conversely, the citizen not only becomes a “child,” but the child takes on a curious ability to stand in for and indeed become the quintessential “citizen.” As a result, the status and rights (or lack thereof) of children become a particularly poignant barometer of all social liberties. While on one hand the endowment of children with citizenship status further secures the essential childishness of citizens, creating the perfect citizen as the one whose abilities and rights are always already restricted, the oppression and subjection of children, and of bad readers, can also be recognized as a symptom and a symbol of the limitations of all citizens. In this way, bad readers have the potential to expose the subjection at the heart of modern citizenship.
‘The Rights of Babies’: The Bad Child Reader as Rebel

While Americans feared that citizens might be too much like children, they were also anxious that they might not be enough like them. Bad child readers came not only to symbolize the citizen’s subjection, but to give expression to a cultural fascination with unruliness and fear of rebellion. Several writers expressed concern that the notion of free citizenship, especially as articulated in America, would lead to insubordinate and independent children. As Jay Fliegelman and Gillian Brown have noted, the link between democracy and rebellious children comes from the language used in the Revolution itself. In his revolutionary tract Common Sense, Thomas Paine uses the figure of the rebellious child as a stand-in for the rebelling colonies, claiming that the “child” colonists have a right to exist separately from Mother England because all children have a right to self-determination. While the colonists in question were, of course, not really children at all, Paine successfully used the image of the rebellious child to incite real adult rebellion. Figures of rebellious children were not the citizen’s inverse, but stood in for the positive rights of all citizens. Far from being “little tyrants,” as independently-minded children would be deemed later, they appeared as natural antidotes to tyranny.

When the new American nation began constructing its own government, the notion that either children or citizens had a right to rebel against their government became much less desirable. While rebellion was a mark of freedom, important to the origin of, and therefore somewhat synonymous with American citizenship, it was also a perceived threat to American nationhood, especially in the shadow of the French Revolution. With the language of both revolutions lingering, national fears of failure,
anarchy, and social insurgency associated with democracy came to be signified by the figure of the rebellious child. Alexis de Tocqueville is famous for noting that American democracy creates a situation in which “the ties of filial obedience are relaxed, day by day.” As a response to Paine and the French Revolution, Hannah More, an English children’s writer popular in America, also expressed her fears that free citizenship might lead to child revolt:

> Who can forebear observing and regretting that in a variety of instances, that not only sons but daughters have adopted something of that spirit of independence, and disdain of control, which characterises the times . . . The next influx of that irradiation which our enlighteners are pouring in upon us, will illuminate the world of grave descants on the rights of youth, the rights of children, and the rights of babies.

While More is using what she sees as the ridiculous notion of “babies’ rights” to call into question other kinds of social reform, the image suggests that the emancipation of babes also signifies for her the ultimate in social chaos. A letter from John Adams to his wife suggests that such sentiments were commonplace in early America: “We have been told that our struggle has loosened the bands of Government every where. That Children and Apprentices were disobedient and that schools and Colledges were grown turbulent.”

Novels perpetuated these fearful images of child rebellion. For example, in Royall Tyler’s *The Algerine Captive* (1797), the narrator, Doctor Updike Underhill, becomes master of a country school, only to find that his pupils are engaged in constant attempts to thwart his authority. One child even goes so far as to sit in the schoolmaster’s chair, with devastating consequences for Underhill’s power over his students: “To have my throne usurped, in the face of the whole school, shook my government to the centre.”
rebels began to act as emblems of the fearful future of American democracy and of the possible instabilities of national life.

Fears of child insurgence particularly manifested themselves as anxieties surrounding children’s reading habits. The command to “love one’s book,” always risked the chance that readers would mistakenly believe that the possessive term referred to “their own” books, determined by their choices and inclinations, and not only to the books approved by society. Robert and Maria Edgeworth suggest that even mostly harmless books might incite rebellious behavior. For example, they devote considerable attention to a line from Anna Laetitia Barbauld’s Lessons in which a small child asks for his dinner. The Edgeworths argue that such lines make children believe that they have rights of command. Barbauld’s hungry and demanding child, they argue, could create societal breakdown through his rebellious employment of linguistic democracy, and this behavior might even lead to an inverted tyranny: “if [children] are permitted to assume the tone of command, the feelings of impatience and ill temper quickly follow, and children become the little tyrants of a family.”

As impressionable beings, children could not be trusted to view incendiary material without being incited to rebel. Because of the rebellious potentials in language, especially in narrative, the Edgeworths recommend that parents carefully monitor what their children read and censor books with scissors to take out the dangerous bits, a suggestion that invokes the similar actions that the American government only recently had been taking against seditious material on a larger scale. Narratives of bad child readers stem from these pedagogical hysterias about “bad” books, giving “life” to the child who rebels through reading. The fictional child
readers of these books often use their love for the wrong books to refuse their consent to
“good” books, their parents, social standards of conduct, and sometimes even laws.\textsuperscript{254}

To complicate matters, the revolutionary use of the rebellious child as a symbol of
the citizen’s freedom made it difficult to suppress the child’s rebellious potentials without
shedding doubt on the citizen’s freedom. As I argued in chapter two, the child had to be
endowed by liberal theorists with innate freedom to maintain the construct of the citizen’s
parallel freedom. For this logic to hold together and create a meaningful idea of
consensual citizenship, the child and citizen also had to be given the right to dissent.
Thus, the legacy of the Revolution and its celebration of rebellious children had to be
preserved, even if revolt was no longer allowed. For this reason, the rebellious child
remained a quintessential American hero with strong cultural appeal, a staple figure of
the novel. To this day, many fictional rebellious child figures take on a conflicted status;
while they are often immoral, lawless and doomed, they are also strangely attractive to
the reader, curiously able to embody American ideals even as they rebel against the
norms that society holds dear.

Some scholars, such as Fliegelman and Brown, have argued that positive images
of child rebellion in the early republican period evidence a leaning towards child
empowerment, or in the very least, a permissive attitude towards children’s behavior.\textsuperscript{255}
Such interpretations have led to a pervasive argument that children’s reading practices
increasingly led to greater agency, mirroring the condition of the citizen. For example,
based on her belief that the figure of the rebellious child signifies increasing freedom for
children in America, Brown argues that bad reader narratives such as Tabitha Gilman
Tenney’s \textit{Female Quixotism} reflect a new cultural preoccupation with granting women
and children individuality and the power of consent. She claims that Tenney’s heroine
Dorcasina, whom I will consider in more detail below, gains through her rebellious
reading “an avenue of self-fulfillment, a means of getting one’s way or one’s pleasures,”
giving her an “individuality” that is respected by the novel, even as it “tether[s]
individual understanding to external standards.” As evidence for this claim, Brown
notes that Dorcasina makes several demands upon those around her, a surprising number
of which are actually answered by her father, servants, and suitors. Ultimately, Brown
argues that the text not only respects Dorcasina’s “individual freedom,” but preserves
what William B. Warner calls the “freedom of readers” by encouraging actual readers to
“choose the coordinates by which to locate [themselves]” and persuading them to identify
with Dorcasina’s rebellion as well as her reform. She links what she sees as a
celebration of the child, reader, and citizen’s freedom directly to Locke, arguing that his
version of liberal theory encourages such resistance by “allowing for and encouraging the
individual’s own manipulations” and by “equipping individuals with the ability to reject
or dispel influences.”

Nevertheless, there are reasons to view these positive readings of the figure of the
child rebel with some skepticism. History suggests that, if anything, actual children were
becoming more constrained in post-Revolutionary America, not less so. As historian
Holly Brewer points out in *By Birth or Consent*, the discourse of the Revolution
ultimately limited the rights of actual children by “explicitly [excluding them] from the
equality in Revolutionary reforms and the ideology underpinning them.” Tracing the
age of consent in England and America from the sixteenth through the eighteenth
centuries, Brewer concludes that children’s signed approval carried more weight on legal
documents, such as wills and indentures, before the invention of liberal theory. The influence of Locke and others limited children’s powers of consent and disqualified them from activities of citizenship that they had previously exercised, such as voting and holding office, as part of an attempt to bolster the notion of the adult citizen’s meaningful consent to government. The child, because subjected to and influenced by the governance of the parent, was considered unable to consent freely to government, notwithstanding the claims made by Locke, Paine, and others in which the child was granted this ability in a fictional, metaphorical, or future realm. As Brewer argues, this ideology of childhood became a way to limit the revolutionary implications of democracy and to allow for the preservation of inequality and exclusion on a larger scale: “The limitation on consent became a powerful weapon in the hands of those who sought to limit the radical implications of equality within the new ideology, either to maintain older exclusions or to create new ones.”

If the child remained relatively subjugated in America, and indeed, as Brewer points out, was a means to secure the subjugation of others, what status do we give the continued existence of the figure of the literary child rebel? Most perceptibly, these portrayals provided a relatively harmless outlet for the expression and dissipation of rebellious energy. Images of children’s rebellion could perfectly illustrate, and ultimately act as proxy for, the citizen’s supposed freedom to dissent because children had this freedom in theory, but could not easily exercise it, nor inflict any lasting damage to the existing political system. The continued popularity of images of child rebellion in the novel relied on the likelihood that children had little potential of rebelling against their parents and even less chance of overthrowing national authority figures. The most
effective forms of rebellion, exercising force or becoming an exile, were not easily accessible to children and were impossible for them to sustain. As contemporary child rights theorist Barbara Arneil argues, “It is the very nature of children that they live in relationships with their parents which, barring extreme situations, they cannot leave.”\footnote{261}

But even more significantly, through the figure of the bad child reader rebellion and even dissent come to be represented as “childish,” the result of seduction, illiteracy, and poor reading skills rather than a legitimate political stance.\footnote{262} The combination of subjection and rebellion in the bad child reader makes this infantilization of dissent especially clear; these readers’ rebellion putatively results from their dependence, ineptitude, and vulnerability to control by bad authority figures. American popular culture was thus able to take the very image of child rebellion that was considered threatening to American democracy and use it to undermine the potential for actual rebellion—either in children or adult citizens. Paradoxically, then, while it was fiction that was considered the greatest incitement to rebellion, it was also fiction that did much of the work of undercutting it. By locating the cultural expression of rebellion in bad children, writers were able to romanticize rebelliousness, while infantilizing, diminishing, and controlling its exercise in America. Seen in this light, the rebellious child reader appears, not as a genuine threat to the nation, but as a talisman designed to ward off, and indeed co-opt, rebellion before it could even happen.

A classic story of a bad reader, Leonora Sansay’s novel Laura (1809), illustrates the ways in which child rebellion is made to be indistinguishable from narrative seduction. The text begins with a European generation of bad child readers, found in a convent in Lisbon. One of these bad readers is the title character’s mother Rosina, who
has been placed in the convent by her parents with the hopes that she will take orders. The convent is similar to the boarding schools that I discussed in chapter two, in that the nuns are educating the children to follow a strict rule of virtuous conduct. Unlike in the boarding school narratives, however, here the nuns must compete directly with other influences for the girls’ attentions. Rosina becomes convinced that she is not made for convent life, likely because of the bad books that the other boarders have snuck into their chambers: “Among the numerous boarders that were continually received in the convent some novels, though strictly prohibited, had found their way.” These books inspire Rosina to act out a fantasy of rebellion that mimics, in miniature, the logic of the American Revolution. Specifically, when her friend Cecilia suggests that Rosina rebel against her parents by allowing a young man named William to rescue her from the convent, Rosina finds in her novels a precedent for the action:

Rosina had gathered from [the novels] that such occurrences were not infrequent; and even the legends which the nuns reported, were often founded on the story of some beautiful lady delivered from enchantment by a valiant knight.  

Rosina’s astute observation that even the nuns must use narrative to convey their lessons demonstrates the pervasiveness of methods of using fiction to create well-behaved citizens. Yet, Rosina uses the same narratives as a passionate incitement to liberate herself from restraint. Soon after hearing the idea from Cecilia, Rosina escapes with William to Philadelphia, a city that symbolizes the American right to self-determination. Despite the connotations of this mini-revolution, the potency of Rosina’s rebellion is quickly undermined by the fact that she is brought to it by becoming foolishly dependent upon treacherous books. Further, her act of insurrection ultimately
yields misery rather than freedom: William is lost at sea and she suffers an early death from a fever.

Addressing the situation of post-Revolutionary American readers, the novel uses Rosina’s downfall as a warning against the temptations of rebellion and offers another chance for the child reader to grow into a responsible adult citizen. Before Rosina dies, she gives birth to Laura. As the central child reader character in this book, Laura inherits her mother’s impressionability and interest in books, and, at first, the text hints that these childish reading habits can make Laura a good reader. While Rosina is alive, she tries to use Laura’s impressionability to convince her to join the convent from which she herself escaped. Like the nuns and the governesses of chapter two, Rosina uses romantic stories, another example of the ways in which “good” narratives could be used to enforce society’s demands. When Rosina dies, however, a rake named George Belfield attempts to replace her in Laura’s affections, causing Laura to face the same crisis of authority that her mother had earlier confronted. Aware of Laura’s impressionability as a child reader, Belfield convinces her to fall in love with him by giving her books, including Pope’s poetry and the story of Abelard and Heloise. Over the course of the text, Laura becomes completely enraptured by these books and begins to read them all of the time, forgetting the lessons that her mother has taught: “Of the world she knew nothing but what she had learned from books. With those books Belfield had supplied her.”

It is Belfield’s image that becomes written on the tabula rasa of her mind: “she passed hours repeating the lines she had heard him recite, and retracing on the tablets of her memory every look, every word, every movement of her friend.” Inevitably, Laura’s bad readership leads to her rebellion against the life her mother has imagined for her, including her rejection of
the suitor that her mother has chosen should she fail to go to Lisbon. Belfield compels Laura to run away with him and quickly convinces her to surrender her virtue. Like Rosina, Laura is both willing participant and helpless victim of seduction.

While Laura is granted the ability to rebel against the typical marriage plot, the novel undermines this rebellion, demonstrating that any rejection of the rules of sexual conduct leads only to tragedy and hardship. Though Belfield claims that he loves Laura and plans to marry her, they are separated during a yellow fever epidemic. He places her in a disreputable boarding house, where she meets another young woman that he has also seduced. After hearing the young woman’s despair, Laura returns to her mother’s grave, starving and close to death. She is finally rescued by a grave digger, taken to her friend Sophia’s house, and reunited with Belfield. However, on the eve of their intended marriage, Belfield is fatally shot. After watching her beloved die, Laura is reduced to “the ravings of a disordered mind.” If the narrative had ended here, it would have joined *The Coquette* as a grim signifier of the child’s inability to attain free citizenship.

But, instead of dying herself, Laura “comes of age.” She is quickly reeducated by a soldier friend of Belfield’s and is able to distance herself from her formerly childish and impressionable self, making the perilous journey from subjected child to free adult citizen. *Laura* thus suggests that citizens of America (perhaps unlike those of Portugal) do not have to remain subjected children but can be free adults by choosing to live by the standards of society. In this way, the text writes both rebellion and subjection out of the American story. While the extent of Laura’s adult “freedom” is called into question by the fact that she is never happy again, demonstrating the restrictions inherent within the definition of free citizenship, the novel casts these constraints as a happy alternative to
the miseries of unabated youth. Laura thus surpasses seduction novels such as The Power of Sympathy and The Coquette by providing a recuperative solution for the seduced reader: re-education and recompense.

**Kiddie Quixotism: The Adult-Child Reader**

The bad reader became such a staple figure of American fiction that she appeared as a character of satire, making her appearance in humorous “Quixote” tales. Reflecting the preoccupation with childhood as the realm of readerly subjection, Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* (1752) was perhaps the first text to attribute the affliction of elderly gentleman Don Quixote to young girl readers. Lennox’s re-imagination of the population most affected by the quixotic “illness” was significant in that it created subjection to one’s books as something that could be “grown out of”; unlike the seduction tale, the Quixote story almost always allows the bad child reader to be redeemed and reintegrated into the progressive narrative of free citizenship by becoming a good adult reader.

Tenney’s *Female Quixotism* (1801) is an especially hyperbolic tale, in which the main character, Dorcasina, is a caricature of all of the typical signs of the bad reader: obsessive love for the “wrong” kind of books, over-blown and theatrical speech and actions, ridiculous reliance on books to determine her behavior, and adamant refusal or inability to accept the standards of proper conduct. Though this text is often read, like the seduction tales, as an attempt to enforce the rules of marriage for American women of the time, Dorcasina is not only a woman reader, but a child reader, both literally and figuratively. The fact that Dorcasina is a child when the text begins gives us a clue as to Tenney’s primary audience. It is, after all, the “younger part” of the female sex that
Tenney addresses in her preface, which she begins “dear girls.” As citizens in formation, children would have been considered particularly in need of Tenney’s satirical corrective on reading. But, even more significantly, precisely because she is a bad reader, Dorcasina continues to be described as childlike even after she has technically progressed beyond her childhood years. As a child reader, Dorcasina symbolizes both subjection and rebellion, making her a necessary, though somewhat troublesome, inverse of the citizen. The text attempts to show that Dorcasina’s rebellion is necessarily a failed one and that her subjection ends when she resumes her proper education into a lawful and free “adult” citizen. In the course of this process, however, the novel inevitably makes clear the collusions between the child and adult citizen, an instability symbolized by Dorcasina’s incongruous and satirical status as an adult-child for most of the novel.

The story of Dorcasina’s childhood suggests that the bad reader is, in many ways, the product of the same process that trains good readers. Even more than Elizabeth Whitman, Rosina, or Laura, Dorcasina is strikingly similar to the good readers described in chapter two. The narrator begins by telling us that Dorcasina has lost her mother at a young age, a circumstance that she has in common with many other good readers, including Little Goody Two Shoes and Jenny Peace. While the loss of a parent is described as a “misfortune” in Dorcasina’s case, much of children’s literature treats it as an advantage for child reader characters, as it allows them to transfer their love to more abstract objects of affection such as tutors and books. Dorcasina, like those readers, responds to the physical removal of her female parent by learning to “love her book.” Dorcasina’s education, also like that of the good child readers, is affectionate and seems to be modeled after Locke’s Some Thoughts Concerning Education. Mr. Sheldon always
governs Dorcasina by his love rather than overt force and helps Dorcasina transfer her affection for him to her books, for which he also has an intense “love.” While the text ultimately claims that this love goes wrong because it is applied to the wrong books, the process is all but identical to the training of the good reader and citizen described in chapter two.

Like the good reader, Dorcasina is able to apply her affection to increasingly abstract objects and to treat texts as if they are physically lovable. In the first few pages of the book, she reads a letter from Lysander’s father that convinces her that she will be in love with his son, even though she has never met him before and only knows him through text. While the text suggests that Dorcasina is simply a fool and a romantic for loving a mere representation, this act of imagination is not so different from that required of good readers, who are asked to apply their love to distant authority figures and to other citizens. An even more striking instance of readerly affection comes later in the text, after Dorcasina has met another one of her lovers, the Irish criminal O’Connor. Dorcasina has been separated from her lover but has collected a packet of all of his letters, textual representations which she loves as fervently as O’Connor himself. In a nearly ritualistic and systematic manner, Dorcasina treats these texts as if they were stand-ins for her lover’s body: “Taking the first in order, she kissed the seal, and the superscription; then, after opening it, and pressing the inside upon her heart, she read it three times over. This done, she folded it up again and placed it in her bosom.”269 She even goes so far as to personify an inanimate object, a handkerchief, by kissing it and talking to it. Again, Dorcasina is cast as quite mad for carrying out this kind of affection for inanimate objects and texts. Her maid Betty is “surprised at scenes so new, and to her comprehension so
foolish” and points out that the handkerchief cannot understand Dorcasina’s meaning. Yet, when we consider Dorcasina’s acts in the context of other children’s narratives, we see that they are not at all “new,” but are suggested by common commands that the reader should “love her book.” Indeed, Dorcasina talking to a handkerchief and kissing letters resembles Giles Gingerbread speaking to his ABCs and eating his books, though it takes on exaggerated and ridiculous form. She recognizes that using items as representations of distant objects is central to the very construction of readerly love: “Ah, Betty, you do not know what love is, if you did, you would know how to appreciate and personify what had once belonged to a lover.”

Betty, of course, has a point in claiming that Dorcasina cannot “talk back” to the handkerchief. What is cast as a loving and reciprocal relationship between reader and text, citizen and law, is quite one-sided and hierarchical. Nonetheless, the fiction that the reader can palpably “know and love” the law is essential for training citizens into a submission that appears to be voluntary. The text suggests that Dorcasina has been trained into this way of understanding texts by her father, the good Lockean tutor. In chapter twelve, both Dorcasina and Mr. Sheldon ruminate on the origin or “invention” of alphabetical letters. After receiving another letter from O’Connor, Dorcasina proclaims that the entire purpose of letters is to represent love to an absent lover:

How strongly do I experience the truth of the poet’s assertion, ‘Heav’n first taught letters for some wretch’s aid / Some banished lover, or some captive maid: / They live, they speak, they breath what love inspires, / Warm from the soul, and faithful to the fires.’

Her willingness to endow text with the ability to “live,” “speak” and “breathe,” and with the capacity to embody and receive affectionate feelings, is a necessary step in
transferring her love to the abstract law. Mr. Sheldon likewise understands writing as a means to access something distant and abstracted from one’s present situation: “all blessings light upon the memory of the inventor of letters . . . How often is the keenest sorrow suspended or forgotten, while one is perusing the entertaining or instructive page.”

Despite her education, Dorcasina’s love for her books fails to make her an ideal citizen, in love with proper authority figures and laws. Instead, it causes her to rebel against societal standards of conduct, such as marrying sensible men, and to refuse to obey any authority that she does not love. Taking the notion of loving readership a step farther than most of the good readers of chapter two, Dorcasina uses her affection (or lack thereof) for texts and their authors as criteria for consciously determining whether they have the right to exercise authority over her actions. She chooses her textual authorities based on whether or not she feels a kindred connection with them, not on whether or not they inspire socially acceptable behavior. Affection becomes the standard by which Dorcasina rejects many “good” authority figures, such as Lysander and Mr. W, whose bland prose perhaps more accurately represents what the language of the law actually sounds like. “Bad” authority figures, such as O’Connor, are better able to write what Dorcasina considers the language of love, and thus, she accepts the authority of all of their assertions. Thus, in this text, the myth that citizens need to love the law actually backfires when those representing the law are unable to compete with other more passionate “lovers.”

The rebellious implications of Dorcasina’s readerly love become particularly evident in her rejection of Mr. W, the text’s most abstract representation of “good”
authority. Mr. W is set off from the rest of the characters in the book in that he is represented purely as language, a member of the alphabet like Giles Gingerbread’s Mr. B and Mr. C, while the other characters get full names that sound much like the characters in Dorcasina’s romance novels. As such, he is a near-representation of the law or social standards himself, of the state that is “made . . . of language.”

Accordingly, Dorcasina initially seems to accept the authority of Mr. W. Indeed, her understanding of the “origin of letters” as expressing voluntary attachments and love causes her to believe that Mr. W will support her in her mini-rebellion against her father’s plan to find a sensible lover: “Her faith in the integrity of O’Connor being still unshaken, she flattered herself that the letter from Mr. W would cause another revolution, in the mind of her father.”

While Tenney’s language evokes the celebration of the rebel child in the American Revolution, the notion of a second revolution, following in the footsteps of the French Revolution, was precisely the fear of many Americans. Because Mr. W is aligned with the self-same social standards that Dorcasina’s “love” causes her to reject, no such “revolution” occurs in the mind of Mr. Sheldon. A bad reader both of books and of citizenship, Dorcasina resists Mr. W’s “law” and refuses to credit his letter. This rebellious act, rather than offering a real challenge to the law, is made ridiculous by the fact that Mr. W is actually telling the truth; Dorcasina has been duped by both her books and O’Connor.

Any potentially subversive results of Dorcasina’s rebellion are likewise made into scenes of satire. While Dorcasina’s bad reading has the potential to endanger the power structure of the household, as she frequently places servants in positions of power, her challenge to class norms manifests itself as a humorous motif of servants wearing their master’s clothes rather than any sort of real revolution. Committing what seems to be a
dangerous symbolic act, Dorcasina allows several servants to take on her father’s authority figuratively by wearing his clothes. Nonetheless, the potency of this act is undermined when the clothes lead their wearers into preposterous situations rather than into true positions of power. Betty is the first to wear Mr. Sheldon’s clothes, when Dorcasina wants her to pretend to be O’Connor, but she is made to look rather ridiculous when Dorcasina forces her to make romantic proclamations. After Dorcasina returns to the house, Betty is made even more of a fool when she misrecognizes a tree for a ghost. Later, after Dorcasina’s father has died, she orders another servant, John Brown, to wear Mr. Sheldon’s clothes, as she believes he is a noble in disguise. As a result, Betty misrecognizes him as Mr. Sheldon’s ghost, creating an uproar in the house until the slave Scippio convinces everyone of the hilarity of the situation. A third image of a servant in masters’ clothes occurs in the scenes where James takes on the identity of his master, Captain Barry. In this case, the joke is on Dorcasina, as she is made a fool by almost marrying a servant. While images of servants in their masters’ clothes have the potential to emblematize the subversive implications of revolutionary democracy, they appear in this text as no more harmful than a childish prank or game of dress-up.

Lest the reader mistake any of these moments as an incitement to rebel, the text reiterates its position on rebellion by asserting that one of Dorcasina’s other lovers, Mr. Seymore, is a bad man because he is “one of the new fangled sort, an atheist, a jacobite, and an illumbenator.” Following the discovery of Mr. Seymore, Betty also tells the story of a man named Mr. M (a curious inverse of Mr. W), who left his family “partly owing to a book that he is very fond of, writ by one Tom Paine, who I am sure deserves the gallows for leading men astray from their wives and families.” The book was likely
The Age of Reason (1794), which was considered scandalous in post-Revolutionary America for its expansive exploration of revolutionary thought. The notion that rebels can be created by poisonous books and subversive book-love is of course central to the text’s attempt to undermine rebelliousness through the act of reading itself. Even so, Mr. M’s rebellion leads to no one’s destruction except his own.

The book likewise demonstrates that the child’s rebellion is a diminished thing that ultimately only hurts the child herself. By the end of the text, Dorcasina is withered, bruised, bald, and humiliated. While Dorcasina appears to exercise too much agency in her refusal of societal standards of behavior, the logic of the text also suggests that she is “imprisoned” by her foolish love of novels, which allows her to be forced into “involuntary” relationships with bad authority figures. We are led to believe over and over that if she were truly “free” to think for herself, she would readily consent to the authority of rational figures such as Mr. W. The text is nearly unrelenting in its depiction of Dorcasina as tricked, seduced, and forced into ridiculous allegiances to the wrong authorities. The logic of the text wants to suggest, then, that Dorcasina’s rebellious tendencies are not based on a mature adult decision to dissent, but on being a childlike victim who cannot help but be subjected to bad authorities. In this way, the text reproduces the reasoning of Locke’s Two Treatises: while children are ignorant of how to follow the law, they are subjected to their parents and other authority figures; when they grow up, they will be both law-abiding and free. In Locke’s terms, we must see Dorcasina as a child, someone whose dependence and ignorance does not permit her to be an independent citizen.
Childhood, in this text as in the others I have described, is not simply a stage of life, but a signifier of the dependency and vulnerability that keep children from being full citizens. Because she is considered to be a deficient citizen, Dorcasina is continually described as a child, even after she has moved beyond her childhood years. For example, when she goes to visit O’Connor in the inn, Tenney writes, “This was one of the most extravagant [schemes] that had ever yet entered the romantic imagination of a love-sick girl, and such as no lady, in her sense, would have attempted to execute.” The clash between Dorcasina’s age and her childlike behavior is often the material for jokes in the text, as when Captain Barry is disappointed to see that she is an old woman and when she tries to appear young by concealing her white hair with powder. As we saw with the story of Elizabeth Whitman, “child” heroines who are older than they seem are common to early American literature—and they are always so marked for being bad readers. The text suggests that Dorcasina will “grow up” only when she gains reason and respect for the standards of society. In the end, Dorcasina substantiates this narrative of citizenship in her own hand when she writes to Harriot of her conversion from a “young and inexperienced” girl to an adult woman.

Of course, the book’s staging of Dorcasina’s transformation from a seduced and subjected child to a free citizen covers up the continuities between her child and “adult” selves. When read between the lines, the text’s conclusion calls into question the idea that the goal of citizenship training is for the reader to “grow up.” Instead of becoming free and self-determining as a result of her education, Dorcasina reenters the training process that I described in chapter two, transferring her affections back to her father and finally to a more “lawful” form of book-love. These actions do not come as a result of Dorcasina’s
“informed choices,” but from seductive tactics that resemble those used by the “bad” authority figures she is being taught to reject. Mr. Sheldon manages temporarily to manipulate Dorcasina’s affections early on in the text, transforming her subjection to her lover into a loving obedience to him: “In mentioning her tenderness for her, he awakened all hers towards him. Regard for her lover was for the moment swallowed up in love for her father.”279 Here, Mr. Sheldon uses affectionate language in a way that resembles that of O’Connor and the other seducers in the text. Rather than representing a graduation from childishness to adult wisdom, Dorcasina’s “good” behavior at the end of the text can be read as a transfer of obedience from her lovers back to a properly abstracted version of her father. The text, after all, ends with Dorcasina recognizing the “extent of [her] obligations” to Mr. Stanly, who has rescued her from her earlier ignorance. Seen in this light, Dorcasina’s status as an “adult child” does not mark her difference from the “grown-up” citizen; rather, it reveals the citizen’s crucial “childishness.”

As the text means to preserve child readers’ subjection and obedience, even as it purports to educate them into free adult citizens, various clues throughout the text reveal the similarities between education, which supposedly liberates the child, and seduction, which enacts her subjugation. To enact Dorcasina’s transformation into a “rational” citizen, Mr. Stanly, who has replaced Mr. Sheldon as a father figure, carries out a seduction scheme that rivals that of any seducer. Echoing Samuel Richardson’s seduction scenes in *Pamela*, the kidnapping scene in Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple*, and an earlier abduction in *Female Quixotism*, Mr. Stanly forces Dorcasina into a coach and takes her to an isolated house in the country where she no longer has access to any of her books.280 While Pamela is forced to read dirty propositions from her seducer, Dorcasina
is compelled to read books about history, which are recommended by pedagogues to train children to be obedient and respectful citizens. On one hand, the text attempts to legitimize any appearance of subjugation in this kidnapping by positing it as the result of Dorcasina’s continued rebellious behavior. Even though Mr. Stanly’s actions require deception and seduction, the text suggests that he is actually “liberating” Dorcasina from her own false beliefs. On the other hand, the kidnapping demonstrates the ways in which liberation and subjection are inextricably tied in early American culture. As Elizabeth Barnes has noted, while the trope of seduction, whether by rakes, authority figures or books, “ostensibly [represents] the perversion of republican virtue,” it actually signifies the methods by which citizenship training operates.281

The connection between educational liberation and seduction finds symbolic expression in the depiction of Dorcasina’s seducers, Philander and Mr. Seymore, who are also, curiously, schoolmasters. Though the first of the two is described as “an excellent scholar,” his name, Philander, associates him more readily with the rake than the affectionate tutor.282 The second, Mr. Seymore, is an even darker figure, who has “squandered all of his time and money in gaming houses and brothels,” and who has actually succeeded in molesting a schoolgirl.283 The literal merging of schoolmaster and seducer in this text suggests again that education is not in opposition to seduction, but, as Karen Sánchez-Eppler has suggested in her analysis of nineteenth-century temperance narratives, has seductive potential that can result in coercion, manipulation, and even abuse.284 While one strain of the text argues that good authority differs substantially from bad authority and that obeying good authority makes one a free, adult citizen, the text’s trope of schoolmasters who are indistinguishable from rakes, and of fathers who gain
obedience through seductive language and kidnapping, betrays the reality that good citizenship also entails subjugation.

Tenney’s preface itself cements the essential similarity between “good” authority figures and rakes by using seductive language to describe her own intent. She says that her book “courts” her young readers’ attention and that she hopes that they will be “induced to read it.” Of course, the seduction that Tenney is attempting to enact is meant not only to keep readers away from “bad” authority figures, as she further argues in her preface, but also to lure them away from any subversive readings of either her text or the citizenship training process. The balancing act of Female Quixotism requires that readers buy into the narrative in which bad child readers can, through “liberation,” become good and free adult citizens, while simultaneously subjecting themselves to Tenney’s authority and the authority of social norms. Even so, Tenney would not need to court her reader if a resistant reading of her own book was not a possibility. Whether her text is successful or not depends in some sense upon how “good” a reader the child is, even though this is the very element that is in question from the beginning of the text. Quite aware of the possibilities for bad readership, Tenney dedicates her book to the very bad readers that she is attempting to eradicate: “All Columbian Young Ladies Who Read Novels and Romances.” The uncertainty surrounding the child reader’s reaction to the text returns us to the very problem bad reader narratives address: the inability to ensure what kind of character we are dealing with in a world in which relationships of power have become abstract. To the extent that authority has become abstract and representational, child readers have also become difficult for the would-be pedagogue to
fully pin down. They exist, not only within the closet and the local schoolhouse, but across an entire nation.

‘Stories for Children by a Baby Six Feet High’: Irving’s Sketches and Childish Readership

Two decades after the publication of *Female Quixotism*, the bad child reader gained new significance with the appearance of Washington Irving’s *The Sketch Book* (1820), a text that was famous for its depiction of another quixotic reader: Ichabod Crane. Ichabod would become well-known throughout the nineteenth century as a portrait of a country schoolteacher. But Ichabod was also a reader—a particularly voracious one, whose reading of Cotton Mather’s “History of New England Witchcraft” inspired his irrational fear of the Headless Horseman. While Irving’s work is significantly different from that of the early American novelists appearing in this chapter, I would like to suggest that Ichabod continues the tradition of the bad child reader in very similar terms, while simultaneously reflecting the beginnings of a shift in the dominant paradigms of childhood.

In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss Irving’s relationship to the history of the child reader and children’s literature on two levels. I read the well-known character of Ichabod Crane within the unlikely context of child readership and will show how in *The Sketch Book*, Irving draws skepticism on the novel’s “coming of age” narrative. Additionally, on the level of reception, I track the ways in which *The Sketch Book* came to be imagined as a book for children. The two most famous stories “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” are now best known as classics of children’s
literature, complete with cartoon versions. This appropriation for child readers is not the misguided work of Walt Disney, as one might suspect, but of Irving’s contemporaries. While *The Sketch Book* was composed as an “adult” text, it was immediately associated with childish tastes and shared with young readers. Early reviews strengthened the book’s association with children by claiming that Irving’s work was “infantile,” clinging to the apron strings of an English parent. As these reviews gave way to Irving’s heroic institution as the Founding Father of American literature, children became an even more central part of his readership. By the end of Irving’s lifetime, *The Sketch Book* had been reprinted and adapted as a children’s reading textbook. Along the way, Irving’s pointed critique of the childish American reader and citizen was increasingly lost, as American education embraced the figure of the happily submissive child reader. At the same time, Irving was influential to a later generation of writers who used childhood as a way to imagine a space unbound by the constraints of adult citizenship, a theme that I will discuss in more detail in chapter four.

Though not originally written for a child audience, *The Sketch Book* was fully embroiled within national debates that evoked the ideals and actualities of childhood: the relationship between an infant American nation and Mother England, between a new generation of young, speculative capitalists and an older generation of rural farmers, and between the governance of the nation (and of citizens) and the governance of the domestic sphere (and of children). The most frequent argument made about Irving’s text is that it asserts the stability of patriarchal ways, resisting the revolutionary energy of the new republic. In *The Sketch Book*, Irving dwells upon the absence of a revolution in the realities of the everyday citizen (most famously in “Rip Van Winkle,” where the portrait
over the tavern door is relabeled from King George to George Washington with no significant alteration). In addition, Irving continually refers to Americans as “grown up children,” an oxymoron that, in the context of a revolution that was founded on a narrative of the child’s coming of age, threatened to undermine the concept of the free and rational American citizen.

At face value, “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” follows a similar logic as Laura and Female Quixotism, relying on Locke’s narrative of progressive education in which the subjected child grows up to be a lawful, but free, adult citizen. Yet, Irving’s bad reader tale, “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” in fact makes a compelling case for the American reader and citizen’s childishness, not least because the child reader in the story turns out not to be a pupil of the country schoolhouse, but its teacher, Ichabod Crane. While Ichabod is frequently considered to be a feminized reader, evidenced by his affinity with the “old wives” of Sleepy Hollow, he is even more strongly marked as childlike, the “companion and playmate of the larger boys” in the schoolhouse. Early illustrations of The Sketch Book support this characterization. Although Irving described the schoolteacher as tall and skinny, the popular depiction by Felix O.C. Darley shows him in a diminutive light: perched upon a high stool, with his feet unable to touch the ground. As the picture hints, Ichabod is not interested in the old wives because he identifies with them, but because he desires their food, to be cared for as if he were a small child. Ichabod’s propensity to love the wrong books is linked with this childlike fixation on food. Irving writes: “His appetite for the marvelous, and his powers of digesting it, were equally extraordinary . . . No tale was too gross or monstrous for his capricious swallow.” Like Dorcasina, Ichabod becomes seduced by his books because
he is unable to relate to them in a rational manner. His belief in the now “bad” authority Cotton Mather, and his tales of witchcraft, causes him to have “night terrors,” a phrase that is generally associated with small children who fear monsters under the bed.

As we have seen, swallowing one’s books was a well-known trope of the child’s internalization of social lessons. Giles Gingerbread, for instance, learns to read by studying and then eating books made of gingerbread. On the flipside, anxieties about children’s exposure to bad books were also expressed through concerns about what a child might swallow. Mary Wollstonecraft argues that women should breast-feed their own children because those “who are left to the care of ignorant nurses, have their stomachs overloaded with improper food, which turns acid.” Servant’s tales were considered as poisonous as their tainted milk. Wollstonecraft warns that servants (the original “old wives”) tell stories of “bugbears,” which threaten children’s development into rational adults. The association of bad tales with servants demonstrates the political stakes of correct reading choices: the oral and written culture of these classes complicated the equation of literacy and morality that was so central to the American definition of freedom. Children also threatened to dismantle this equation because they were believed to have a natural attraction for these irrational stories—a problem which caused the influence of the parent to be forever pitted against that of the governess or storyteller.

There is evidence that early readers read Ichabod’s character, and Irving’s work in general, precisely within this cultural and pedagogical framework. Ghost stories, such as “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” were associated with childish tastes rather than with adult reason, freedom, and self-sufficiency. A New York reviewer claimed that Sleepy Hollow brought to mind “the dim, floating impressions of the nursery days . . . the . . .
appalling stories of Jack O’Lantern and Whip-poor-Will, of dough-faces, of winding sheets.”

Irving’s “Tales from a Traveler,” which contained more ghost stories, attracted virulent comments from a Philadelphia reviewer who scorned its childish appeal. He writes, it is inappropriate for an American author “to speculate on the most weak, infantile, and degrading of all the fears that make man a wretched victim to his distempered fancy,” especially in an age that has abandoned “all the vulgar errors and prejudices that formerly fettered the reason.” He recommends that “Mr. Washington Irving’s [work] would sell more rapidly if the Booksellers would alter the Title, and call it ‘Stories for Children’ by a Baby Six Feet High.”

This reviewer finds the idea of an American author bound to the impressionable reading habits of childhood particularly offensive because it challenges the notion of an educated populace that has “come of age.” Read through this cultural lens, Ichabod will only “grow up” when he is able to wield reason and become “free” from his childish attachment to his books.

Does Ichabod grow up? Irving offers two alternatives: one told by a farmer and the other told by the old wives of Sleepy Hollow. In the farmer’s version, Ichabod leaves the town after his encounter with the Headless Horseman and becomes an adult citizen, turning his attention from his ghost stories to the correct “books”: those of the law. Ichabod’s reorientation is typical of an early American story of a bad reader’s reeducation. His ride with the headless horseman is even somewhat tame compared to Dorcasina’s kidnapping in Female Quixotism. After Ichabod has been awakened to the “foolishness” of his childish reading practices, he becomes (according to the farmer) a model citizen. We learn that he has “been admitted to the bar, turned politician, electioneered, written for the newspapers, and finally been made a justice of the Ten
The fact that Ichabod is able to participate in this wide array of citizenly duties by learning to read the law lends credence to the nation’s most hallowed political narrative in which education secures the child’s development into a free adult.

But despite the old farmer’s ending for Ichabod, Irving does not ultimately trust that literacy can or should create this kind of rational, participatory, and socially mobile adult citizenship. After all, he casts doubt on the old farmer’s story by locating it in the realm of mere hearsay. Even if Ichabod grows up to become a politician, he only does so by being duped—a detail that suggests that both irrational books and American political narratives rely on the citizen’s “swallowing” of spectral fantasies. By making the foolish Ichabod a politician and judge, Irving hints that one must have quixotic tendencies to have confidence in the law. In doing so, he recalls a passage from his earlier *Salmagundi*, in which foreign visitor Mustapha Rub-a-Dub Keli Khan compares the U.S. government to a “mighty windmill” composed of hot air and words that have no effect on the average citizen. Mustapha also balks at a handbill written by the “ghost of George Washington” and observes the “fatal . . . despotism” that “empty names and ideal phantoms exercise . . . over the human mind.” Political propaganda, it seems, is not so distinct from ghost stories. It is no coincidence that the cause of Ichabod’s bad behavior is a history book written by the Puritan forefather Cotton Mather—the kind of book that was supposed to cure bad reading. Elsewhere in *The Sketch Book*, Irving claims that universal literacy does not lead to the freedom of the American populace, but renders citizens impressionable and easy to manipulate. He writes: “Over no nation does the press hold a more absolute control than over the people of America; for the universal education of the poorest classes makes every individual a reader.” In this light, the
narrative of Ichabod’s transition into a free adult citizen becomes, not a triumphant celebration of the effectiveness of rational education, but a joke.

The punch line comes from the “old wives” themselves. In their version of the story, which Irving suggests is a “better” one, Ichabod is transformed not into a free citizen, but into a ghost who haunts the local schoolhouse. Thus, Ichabod remains a perpetual “child,” forever located in an infantile space and never reaching adult status.

The postscript of “Sleepy Hollow” casts further doubt on the narrative by reducing it to an absurd syllogism: “For a country schoolmaster to be refused the hand of a Dutch heiress is a certain step to high preferment in the state.” The postscript deliberately pokes fun at the pedagogical assumption that books enact the reader’s education: the listener receives this nonsensical logic when he asks what the “moral” of the story is supposed to be.

Given the text’s derision of the very principle of educational literature, it is perhaps surprising that The Sketch Book was frequently used throughout the century as an educational tool—even if discerning pedagogues suggested that readers just skip the postscripts altogether. The text’s transformation into a children’s book can be traced to its first readers, many of whom disregarded pedagogues’ warnings about the dangers of ghost stories and read “Sleepy Hollow” at family gatherings. Henry Longfellow, who claimed the The Sketch Book was his “first book” when he was a schoolboy, likely encountered the text this way. But this initial (mostly oral) transmission of Irving’s tales quickly gave way to the book’s formal adaptation as a children’s reading textbook, signaling a shift in its meaning to American readers. The first textbook based on Irving’s work, The Crayon Reading Book (named after sketchbook narrator Geoffrey Crayon),
appeared in 1849, an event that more than one reviewer cited as the “height” of Irving’s literary career. This celebratory attitude, praising child readers as Irving’s ideal audience, could hardly represent a more drastic shift from the early reviewer who berated Irving for writing ghost stories. The change in the public estimation of child readers suggests that the fear of bad readership had in some ways subsided as the nation itself matured, dulling Irving’s critique of the childish citizen and reader. Yet, the association of ideal readership with schoolchildren highlights the ways in which childish impressionability remained a desirable feature of citizenship. The Crayon Reading Book reasserts the ties between literacy, moral submission, and perceived freedom. One reviewer claims that the text was particularly adept at enticing “the youthful mind along the pathway of knowledge.”

Other pedagogues followed suit, declaring that Irving’s work would aid in the project of creating free and rational American citizens through reading. One late-nineteenth-century school book by Homer Sprague, former head master of a Boston high school for girls, built an entire curriculum around The Sketch Book. In his preface, Sprague promotes a friendly and affectionate relationship between author and book: “The writer studied should become a friend, a companion; ‘for indeed there is something of a companionship between the author and reader.’” Sprague makes it clear that a loving relationship with a good authority such as Irving will encourage conformity to social expectations in reading. An advertisement in the back of the book further argues that love for good books creates moral readers, acting as an antidote to bad or rebellious readership:

A desire for good books can always be gratified—a gratification giving not only the deepest pleasure, but bringing the reader directly into a range of the greatest moral influences. Young people whose tastes are trained to the enjoyment of
Scott’s Ivanhoe or Irving’s Sketch Book will not become infatuated with sensational literature . . . When we are able to provide our boys and girls with wholesome reading, we guard them from the evil in books.  

This advertisement uses a similar logic to Tenney’s Female Quixotism: the child who loves bad books is “infatuated” with or subjected to her books, while the child who loves good books is free to have “gratification” and “pleasure.” Interestingly, the advertisement also includes the phrase, “A Revolution in School Reading,” demonstrating the co-optation of revolutionary language to describe children’s limited freedom in reading and to sell socially acceptable books, not to encourage the child’s emancipation from reading constraints.

Books intended to introduce children to Irving in the less institutionalized space of the home, such as Amanda B. Harris’s American Authors for Young Folks (1887), also demonstrate an effort to preserve social norms through reading. Like Sprague, Harris evokes an affectionate approach to readership, suggesting that it is not enough to “have a page of two of Rip Van Winkle” because it is unlikely that such indifferent readers “really know Rip, and his dog Wolf.” Truly an advocate of the command to “love one’s book,” she suggests that readers must understand what makes Irving “our Irving.” Like Sprague, Harris claims that this love for books will encourage morality and essentially eliminate bad readers: “as you grow up with a love of books . . . you will know how to choose the sweet kernels of truth, and learn to loathe the evil, and to distrust everything which confuses the border lines between right and wrong.” To reestablish these lines, pedagogues often had to engage in what seems to be willful misreading of the book. A critic for the American Whig Review claims that “Sleepy Hollow” is a celebratory tale of the common citizen’s rise to political power. He writes “in this country
of ours . . . the sovereign is found . . . in the ragged, bare-headed urchin . . . as [well as] in the starchy inmates of colleges and universities . . . [It] is a fact well authenticated that genuine country schools have been the nurseries of the most exalted intellects that have shed renown on our history." 308 As true or false as this may be, Irving’s story belies this very conclusion. Ichabod’s pupils never graduate from the schoolhouse, but abandon it, reasoning that if literacy leads to behavior like Ichabod’s, it is best not to read at all.

The abandonment of the schoolhouse in “Sleepy Hollow” hints that one strategy for disentangling freedom and submission is to abandon literacy altogether. Yet Irving seems unsatisfied with this solution. Revealing his ambivalence about the citizen’s childishness, he claimed that Americans should try to address their juvenile status by taking their “examples and models . . . from the existing nations of Europe.” 309 This attitude is complicated by sketches that depict Britain’s books as stale and irrelevant to modern readers. In “Roscoe,” he depicts an impoverished British poet, who is forced to auction his library to cover his financial losses. Irving compares the buyers, a group of barely literate commoners, to “Pigmies rummaging the armory of a giant, and contending for weapons which they could not wield.” 310 The “pigmy” (or small, childlike reader) would have been familiar to Irving’s audience as a trope for Americans’ stunted intellectual and political development. Crayon claims early in The Sketch Book that he went to England to see the giants from which his race had diminished. Still, while American readers and citizens lack the skills that Roscoe possesses, Irving hints that the kind of patriarchal and hyper-learned adulthood that Roscoe represents is outdated, in need of reinventing. Here, the comparison to the pigmy suggests that the savagery associated with illiteracy was a repugnant solution for Irving. Yet, the notion of a savage
reader also evokes an alternative vision of education, one that Irving explores in his sketches on Native Americans and, more implicitly, in his treatment of child readers.

In “The Mutability of Literature,” Irving employs child readers to create a different possibility for American citizenship and literary enterprise. In this sketch, as in Roscoe, Britain becomes a place of dusty books that are not of use to the present-day reader. Exploring the Westminster library, Crayon meets with an old book that talks and expresses a desire to be rustled through by rowdy child readers. He says, “Books were written to give pleasure and to be enjoyed . . . let [the dean] once in a while turn loose the whole School of Westminster among us” so that we may have an airing. The very idea of a group of children let loose in the library would have been enough to distress pedagogues exceedingly. Accordingly, the book’s proposition shocks the bookish Crayon, who has gone there to escape the “madcap” schoolboys. Yet the sketch celebrates the potential for the child reader to make things new. Irving hints that young Americans must ultimately reject the dusty reading of Britain altogether, allowing for a new generation of genius. “Rip Van Winkle” likewise celebrates childishness as a valuable feature of American literary culture. Rip is the playmate of the village children and, though not explicitly a reader, he is a teller of superstitious tales. While he was punished as a member of the British colonies, the new American nation honors Rip as a valuable member of the community, whose fantastic story is known by all of the “rising generation.” Here, Irving hints that the nation’s power rests not in coming of age, but in harnessing the imaginative capacities of childishness for literary purposes. It is no coincidence that Crayon’s pen-name would come to evoke the child’s broad imaginative strokes rather than Roscoe’s black-letter poetics.
Recalling Ichabod’s propensity to swallow every book he reads, Crayon was himself described as a child reader who devours books of voyages and travels. The description of Crayon as a “book-eater” became part of the mythology surrounding Irving himself in children’s culture. Harris claims that he was “‘a dawdler in routine studies,’ but boy-like, fond of Pilgrim’s Progress, Robinson Crusoe, Sinbad [and] Orlando Furioso.” 314 Like Ichabod’s “swallowing” of superstitious tales, this type of bibliophagia (or book-eating) was considered dangerous by pedagogues. If romances were considered to be the most treacherous books for girls (and country schoolmasters), adventure books were the equivalents for boys. Maria and Robert Edgeworth warn that, whereas girls will soon perceive “the impossibility of their rambling about the world in quest of adventures,” boys will not be stopped by the difficulties in indulging their tastes for rebellion. 315 Indeed, the child Crayon does not accept the “impossibility” of such literary adventuring, but instead indulges his desires. He writes: “How wistfully would I wander about the pier-heads in fine weather, and watch the parting ships . . . and waft myself in imagination to the ends of the earth!” 316 Moments like this anticipate a paradigm shift in the very definition of childhood. While Locke associated childishness with subjection and adult rationality with freedom, the nineteenth century’s romantic and sentimental redefinition of childhood would often reverse these terms.

Thus, while one strain of The Sketch Book’s literary afterlife envisions the book as a means through which to create wholesome citizens and readers, its other legacy is its representation of childhood as a space of imaginative freedom. In the years following the book’s publication, the child became for many in the literary world a figure of contempt, associated with educational efforts to secure social conformity. Emerson, for example,
remarked that society was composed of “young and foolish persons.”

But, at the same time, his nonchalant little boys who do not follow the commands of their parents offer an imaginative outlet through which to envision a citizenship where freedom is no longer based on submission. Irving’s vision of the imaginative liberties of childhood was even more appealing to a post-war generation of American writers such as Mark Twain, Thomas Aldrich, and William Dean Howells, who associated boyhood, not adulthood, with freedom. It is no coincidence that the two imaginative stories, “Rip” and “Sleepy Hollow,” became the most frequently reprinted tales at this point, appearing in large, colorful editions. This generation viewed Ichabod not as a satirical figure representing the nation’s childishness, but as a ridiculous old man from whom every boy might easily rebel. As a reflection of his newfound “age,” he gets much larger and more sinister in illustrations. But Ichabod’s size does not deter children from their rebellious fantasies. One reviewer goes so far as to suggest that children should mischievously rename their schoolteachers “Ichabod Crane.” In many ways, these scenes of child rebellion are no less fantastical than Ichabod’s transition into a free adult citizen. Yet, childish reading begins to be conceived, not as a hindrance to freedom, but as an escape from constraint.

In chapter four, I will continue my discussion of the bad child reader, opening the definition of this reader to include not only seduced readers, but readers who are more strongly labeled as “adventurous,” defiant, and even disengaged. As the nineteenth century progressed, American readers continued to be described as “bad” and puerile, and American literature gained the dubious reputation of being like “children’s literature.” Yet, by the middle of the nineteenth century, the formerly “bad” child reader also took on a privileged status. As children’s literature continued to expand and thrive, authors such
as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Nathaniel Hawthorne began to ask how the bad child reader associated with the American citizen could be redeemed as a positive and transformative figure of national growth.
CHAPTER 4

‘NOTHING BUT BABY FACES’: THE AMERICAN RENAISSANCE AND THE NATURAL CHILD READER

Many of the foremost literary accomplishments of the nineteenth century can be said to begin with the problem of the American citizen’s supposed childishness. In an image that directly links the citizen with the child reader, Henry David Thoreau claims that Americans are “forever repeating our a b abs, and words of one syllable, in the fourth or fifth classes, sitting on the lowest and foremost form all our lives.” Thoreau’s metaphor demonstrates the extent to which children’s reading had, by the antebellum era, come to be associated with incompetence, deficiency, and unquestioning docility, functioning as convenient shorthand for nearly all forms of subjugation. For Thoreau, the child’s repetition of basic letters from the spelling book signifies unconscious submission not only to alphabetic order, but to what he considered repressive social norms. A life in the “lowest form”—or continuous childhood—was a life of “quiet desperation.” Many nineteenth-century writers shared the conviction that American readers were childish, a perception that was perhaps driven by the growing consumer base of child and
“childlike” readers. The early novel’s attempts to liberate its childish readers, as well as to write its own “coming of age,” were perceived by many to be a failure resulting in the continued nonage of both American citizens and their books. The child reader became a pervasive metaphor not only for Americans’ inability to read reflectively, but for all of the culture’s anxieties about itself, including America’s deficient national literature, political conformity, and lack of cultural finesse. In a literary effort that would come to be known as the American Renaissance, writers such as Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville strove finally to enact a “coming of age” for American letters, using “children’s literature” as a pejorative to describe all that had preceded their endeavors. Antebellum literary magazines proclaimed the final emergence of American literature from its infancy. One columnist writes, “Amid the difficulties, that ever embarrass the infancy of a nation, it struggled into existence . . . and now our literature, of late birth, but of speedy growth, claims as its right and receives [its] due.”

Yet, a continued obsession with childhood can be said to be a defining feature of this period. Many of the very authors who struggled against the argument that all American literature was “children’s literature” and all Americans “child readers” themselves wrote children’s books or positioned children as ideal readers. Hawthorne, for instance, scorned children’s literature and the “scribbling women” who wrote it, but composed seven books and several stories for young people. The “scribblers,” including Harriet Beecher Stowe, Susan Warner, Lydia Maria Child, Catharine Sedgwick, and Maria Cummins, became some of the most celebrated writers of the period by writing largely for young audiences and populating their texts with child characters. True to its title, the American Renaissance (and what Jane Tompkins terms “the Other American
Renaissance” in women’s fiction) can thus be understood simultaneously more as a “rebirth” or reinvention of the child reader than a definitive rejection of childishness itself. Child readership would, in the course of the nineteenth century, be split into two opposing images: one a tamed urchin, an icon of subjection, conventionality, and cultural lack; the other a naturally free, innocent, and boundless redeemer, bringing moral and creative renewal to a society that has become sterile and corrupt.

The child reader’s newfound “two-ness” was partially the result of a major paradigm shift in the ideologies of childhood and adulthood, which created conflicts between latent and residual theories of childishness. In the nineteenth century’s ideology of the family as a haven from the public world of work, children were reconceived as sentimental objects whose primary value was based on the fact of their childishness, rather than their potential to act as adults. This “new” childhood granted fictional images of children an exalted status unparalleled by any of the portraits that had come before. As Judith Plotz writes, the nineteenth century “produced and naturalized ‘the child’ as both the normative human being, and also the fetishized ‘sublime object’ that deploys multiple cultural fantasies.” New conceptions of childhood as “free,” “innocent,” and “natural” became such truisms that anthropologist Wilfred Meynell claimed in 1892 that the nineteenth century “discovered the child.” At stake in this new vision of childhood were the very issues of freedom and subjection that I have been tracing. The prevailing eighteenth-century ideology, I have argued, cast childhood as a time of submission to one’s parents, while adulthood was defined as the final achievement of freedom from childish constraints. Nineteenth-century authors revised this narrative so that the traditional attainment of adult citizenship through reading was
seen instead as an initiation into societal limitations, giving rise to incompetent and/or corrupt “adult children” rather than self-reliant citizens. The child, conversely, was presumed to be naturally unfettered by social obligations and the texts that enforced them. For the American Renaissance writers as for Locke, childhood became the key to freedom—no longer because childhood represented the time of voluntary submission to law, but because such constraint was no longer imagined to be strictly required for children.

Of course, this new paradigm did not fully redefine the experience of childhood so much as reinforce the growing split between different representations of childishness. There were always children and childlike adults (the poor, for instance) for whom constraint was deemed both inescapable and necessary. These subjected children were associated, for many, with a kind of childhood and citizenship that had past, but in reality the constraints of childhood were becoming more pervasive and perceptible in this period, with the increased visibility of industrial child laborers, orphans, and slaves. By the mid-nineteenth century, reformers considered the presence of children in city streets as a primary index of social decay and targeted these children with special schools, missionary efforts, and printed reading material.325

As a result of this rift in the meaning of childhood, children’s reading took on a bifurcated status. As Harvey J. Graff has noted, literacy in the nineteenth century was considered largely inseparable from “order, cohesion, and hegemony.”326 The century’s literacy efforts, represented by the spelling book, the Sunday school, and the recitation, continued to promote conformist behavior, even as the literary trope of the naturally uninhibited child gained predominance. The cultural equation of literacy with submission
logically suggested that a “natural” childhood would have to be disassociated with reading altogether. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who was a foundational thinker in this redefinition of childhood, claimed that the ideal education would eschew all books except for *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). Yet, illiteracy was, for nineteenth-century authors, an even less desirable state, associated with cultural (and literal) poverty, as well as with a kind of unreflective barbarism—partially because uneducated, “natural” childhood had been appropriated as a powerful ideology to support the dispossession of black Africans and Native Americans by virtue of their supposed inability to act as independent citizens. While many writers contested this situation, they often did not fully discard its assumptions. A conception of the natural child as reader was thus essential for theorizing an alternative social model that merged naturalness and self-sufficiency with sophistication, social harmony, and civilized culture. To keep this purified notion of readership from all of the negative associations of American literacy, authors attempted to sever what was a long-standing link between reading as expressive, imaginative, and individualistic and reading as indoctrinating and repressive.

In this chapter, I will trace the “splitting” of the child reader as it appears in two very different nineteenth-century literary movements: transcendentalism and sentimentalism. As I demonstrate, these two literary efforts were historically situated within a period of widespread cultural rejection of the incompetent and deficient child reader, represented in periodicals, literary texts, and even some children’s textbooks. Yet, both movements, though invested with distinct social aims, also used the image of the “natural” child, positioned outside of the bonds of law, as an experimental proposition through which to imagine alternate forms of social organization. Transcendentalist
writers, including Emerson, Thoreau, Elizabeth Peabody, and A. Bronson Alcott used the child reader, often coded as male, to imagine a “natural” citizenship, in which Americans could be unified through their simultaneous reading of nature’s inherent truths without the need for consent to books or laws. Similarly, sentimental writers, such as Susan Warner, Maria Cummins, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, present the innocent child’s reading of society through the lens of nature and the Bible as a means to challenge existing social inequities such as slavery and poverty. In both cases, childhood represents new possibilities, what R.W.B. Lewis has deemed the regenerative qualities of an “American Adam.”

Simultaneously, both movements were haunted by the need for new understandings of constraint in order to prevent the social dissolution that occurs when “natural” citizens do not read the world homogenously, a problem explored most thoroughly by Hawthorne (who had sympathies with both movements and who therefore acts, in this chapter, as a bridge between them). Taking their cue from the child reader’s long history of blending freedom and subjection, both transcendentalist and sentimentalist writers used childhood also to limit the radical possibilities implied by their rejection of the supreme authority of law. The most powerful result of the nineteenth century’s redefinition of childhood is the creation of the child reader as a rhetorical figure who, herself located outside of the bonds of submission required by citizenship, simultaneously demands unified reading and sentiment among adults and, often, other children. The paradoxical status of such a “natural” reader, simultaneously liberated from and incorporable by society, hints at the ethereality and ultimate elusiveness of the new childhood in terms of its reflection of the freedoms enjoyed by actual children. But it
does not undermine its power; specters of natural children effectively pressure citizens to ensure the innocence and freedom of the young by acting within the parameters of rigid morality.

Ultimately, as is hinted by the disciplinary role of the natural child reader, the division of childishness into two opposing images masks their inescapable unity, their common symbolism and purpose. Despite efforts to separate ideal, “natural” children from the constraints suffered by feeble, disciplined children droning their letters in rows, these same unrestrained children raise their forceful and persuasive voices to compel the “voluntary” conformity of others. And despite their limitations, the unimaginative urchins trapped in schoolhouses and gutters across the nation plead pitifully for release and renewed innocence, which comes, paradoxically, from continued allegiance and conformity to the rigid structures of society. Childhood must, in the end, continue to equate freedom with submission, liberty with constraint. While the doubling of the child reader represents an attempt to reshape the terms of this equation, the persistence of childishness as an ideal for readership and citizenship demonstrates that it remained relevant and, indeed, irresistible to those striving to create an American literature and culture.

A Game of Blindman’s Bluff: The Transcendentalist Rejection of the Child Reader

The contradictory status of children in transcendentalist writing has caused disagreement among scholars about whether or not Emerson and Thoreau intended for the child to be seen as the ideal model of transcendental consciousness or as an unconscious savage. Through my analysis, it will become clear that this disagreement
stems in part from the fact that the child plays two different roles in transcendentalism. On the one hand, the child acts as a metaphor for the (often adult) citizen who is a slave to cultural norms and no longer has an understanding of the meaning of language. On the other, the child is a symbol of naturally enlightened existence, signifying a mode of reading the world that the citizen must cultivate in order to return to his “natural” freedom and power. Both versions of childhood gained currency and influence in the nineteenth-century imagination, becoming inextricable from the very definition of American childhood.

The transcendentalist use of the child to signify the citizen’s subjection stemmed from what had become, by the nineteenth century, an oft-repeated motif in print culture: Americans as overgrown children. This motif appeared as early as 1801, in a column by The Port-Folio editor Joseph Dennie entitled “The Lay Preacher.” A staunch critic of American society, Dennie claims that the nineteenth century is an age of childishness:

> The world has, by the fancy of bards, or by the austerity of monks, been compared to a wilderness, a prison, and to a mad house. To me, its present aspect is a great nursery . . . All are frivolously employed; and into whatever nook I cast my eyes, I see nothing but baby faces, and childish play.331

According to Dennie, Americans’ resemblance to children is most visible in their reading choices: “I am not at a loss in what class to rank an audience, who snore over the scenes of Shakespeare, and are broad awake to the mummery of pantomime.”332 In literature, he concludes, “a childish taste prevails, and childish effusions are the vogue.”333 In an image that anticipates a similar one in Hawthorne’s Grandfather’s Chair (1840), he argues that American readers are “as awkward as my nephew Bobby, now riding across my study on a broomstick.”334 Significantly, Dennie associates the childishness of these “full grown
creatures” not with their inability to resist seduction by their books, but with an *illusion* of political freedom, power, and choice: “Everything shows fantastic and puerile. Legislators with bits of motley ribbon in their caps; and compelled to wear this republican girth web, imagining themselves free.”335 Through this image, Dennie foregrounds what had remained implicit in the novels and children’s books of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: the concept of freedom, as articulated in the American political system, relies upon people imagining themselves to have liberty while simultaneously being “like unto children.”

By the second decade of the nineteenth century, the motif of Americans as children had reached the point of cliché or cultural shorthand, acting as a telling index of new, often negative, cultural sentiments surrounding both children and institutionalized reading. Magazines and newspapers, when referring to “the American character,” were often directly referencing this common stereotype. For example, an anonymous contributor to an 1820 edition of the gentleman’s periodical *The Microscope* begins his “Dissertation on Certain Traits of the American Character” by claiming that “Americans are a strangely docile people,” much like young children.336 Like Dennie, he argues that this characteristic stems from the pervasive belief among citizens that they have freedom and agency, while their political power actually remains stunted and ineffective. He claims that this dubious belief is a direct result of America’s educational system; schools usher children so quickly through complex subjects and texts that they think they have mastered them when they have really only gained a superficial understanding, a problem that corresponds to their false schooling in political freedom. The contributor argues that children are thus prematurely “read out” at a young age and think they can become
masterful politicians, but “this youthful giant handles [politics] with as much dexterity and as little ceremony, as a child, his wooden sword.”\textsuperscript{337} The child reader who has seemingly gained knowledge and liberty does not, in reality, possess anything of value.

Nineteenth-century authors, particularly those who have come to make up the canon in American universities, joined with critics in the opinion that American readers were superficial, mechanical, and childish. As Beverly Lyon Clark has argued, part of what defined many writers as canonical authors was the stated objective \textit{not} to write for children.\textsuperscript{338} For example, Herman Melville remarks that Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown” does not sound worthy because it sounds like a children’s book title: “You would of course supposed that it was a simple little tale, intended as a supplement to ‘Goody Two Shoes.’”\textsuperscript{339} His assertion that Hawthorne’s short story is indeed not a children’s tale signals his frustration with American readers, who persist in reading Hawthorne as a child reader would: “You may be witched by his sunlight . . . but there is a blackness of darkness beyond . . . In one word, the world is mistaken in this Nathaniel Hawthorne.”\textsuperscript{340} Melville’s opposition between Hawthorne’s work and children’s books is central to his understanding of the author’s greatness, as well as to his personal “coming of age” as an author. Melville often complained that his own, professedly inferior, early novels resembled children’s literature. For example, in a letter to Hawthorne, he regretted that in the future \textit{Typee} will be given to babies “along with their gingerbread.”\textsuperscript{341} When Melville gives his advice, “Let him write like a man, for then he will be sure to write like an American,” what resonates is not only his desire for a national (masculine) authorship, but also his sentiment that American readers and their literature are in need of maturation.\textsuperscript{342} In the work of many American Renaissance writers, these two objectives
would come to be the same. Manhood, as authors and as a nation, meant rejecting the shallow conformity and lack of sophistication associated with the ever feminized child reader.

Writing from a profound dissatisfaction with the conformity inherent within America’s system of government, the transcendentalists likewise staged a critique of citizenship that hinged upon a rejection of the dominant ideologies of childhood and reading. Appropriating the imagery of subjected childhood that had become thoroughly disseminated through literary and popular culture, they frequently used references to children as metaphors for Americans’ incompetence and unreflective participation in the social customs and institutions that guaranteed their continued subjection. For example, Emerson often cast Americans’ conformity as a game of “Blindman’s Buff,” after the popular children’s activity. Rather than echoing the bildungsroman found in the early American novel, transcendentalist writers used the figure of the child to highlight their belief that Americans were being kept as political children, as well as to critique the technologies of reading and education that had so stunted the citizen’s growth. Like other nineteenth-century thinkers, they recognized what I have argued in previous chapters: that the child played a major role in reifying the social structures of obedience and submission that made social conformity so pervasive and desirable, specifically by learning to love language and the abstract concepts that it embodied. As a result, Emerson and Thoreau not only rejected the dominant ideal of childlike conformity that had established itself in America, but also the assumptions about and uses of reading that had helped to maintain its dominance as a model for citizenship.
Unlike early American novelists, who labored to protect the notion that “good” reading transformed the child into an adult, the transcendentalists directly identified the role of literacy in enforcing the citizen’s perpetual childishness. Thoreau’s metaphor of Americans as schoolhouse readers repeating “a b abs” suggests not only that the nation’s citizens have not graduated from childhood, but also that this “coming of age” narrative does not accurately describe the purpose of education in America. Emerson uses a similar image of American people as “children who repeat by rote the sentences of granddames and tutors.”

344 The ritualistic character of the reading practices described in these passages—rote memorization, recitation, spelling—hints at what Emerson and Thoreau considered the institutional basis for American conformity. They argued that the modes of reading taught in American schools were functioning to stunt the growth of its citizens rather than to establish them as liberated adults. Thoreau further emphasizes the role of literacy training in promoting the citizen’s childishness by claiming that he does not distinguish between “the illiterateness of my townsmen who cannot read at all, and the illiterateness of him who has learned to read only what is for children and feeble intellects.”

345 In Thoreau’s terms, reading instruction, as commonly practiced, has not created greater knowledge or liberty but has made American citizens indistinguishable from illiterate children.

The complex status of literacy in Emerson’s and Thoreau’s work, as simultaneously a marker of and a potential cure for feeble intellects, hints at the eventual solution for the citizen’s childishness in the “natural” child reader. Yet, in the view of the transcendentalists, nineteenth-century common reading was far removed from the state of nature. Though it remained haphazard in many respects, the book market had reached
unparalleled proportions through the spread of print technology, which led to greater production and availability of books, as well as the potential for superficial, extensive reading instead of the intimate, intensive reading of the past. Thoreau particularly denounces a section in his local circulating library called “Little Reading.” For him, this library shelf is an indicator of the ways in which the increasing numbers of texts and faster production of materials have turned American readers into children:

All this they read with saucer eyes, and erect and primitive curiosity . . . just as some little four-year-old bencher [reads] his two-cent gilt-covered edition of Cinderella—with-­out any improvement that I can see . . . This sort of gingerbread is baked daily and more sedulously than pure wheat or rye-and-­Indian in almost every oven, and finds a surer market.

In this passage, Thoreau hints that the growing availability of books reinforces superficial literacy by keeping readers from progressing to “the best books of literature.” What he calls an American race of “tit-men” has learned to read “only as far as Easy Reading, the primers and class-books, and when we leave school, the ‘Little Reading’ and story books, which are for boys and beginners.” The feminization of the (apparently masculine) reader in this description of “tit-men” is not coincidental, for as I have described, young female readers had by this time been associated with the reading public, as well as with affectionate obedience to the state and subjection to their books. Thoreau’s description of conformist books as “gingerbread” (similar to Melville’s) is also deliberate, perhaps a reference to colorfully-marketed early children’s books such as The Renowned History of Giles Gingerbread (1765). Both Thoreau and Emerson rejected the pedagogical reliance on treats and bribes to encourage reading, as they believed that this led to a false sense of both freedom and adulthood.
The equations of love, desire, reading, and political consent developed in the eighteenth century were, to Emerson, infantilizing and coercive, especially in their appropriation of personal relationships to enforce a conformist social model. Thinking perhaps of the many moral guidebooks written under the guise of an affectionate governess or family member, Emerson observes, “when we mistake books for divinity and genius, they become ‘nonsense’ and the guide is a tyrant. We sought a brother, and lo, a governor.”\(^{350}\) And countering the eighteenth-century myth that bibliophagia leads to social ascendancy, Emerson argues that internalizing textual lessons literally incapacitates citizens instead of leading them towards self-realization: “We are shut up in schools . . . for ten or fifteen years and come out at last with a belly full of words and do not know a thing.”\(^{351}\)

Transcendentalist educator Elizabeth Peabody, who was involved in the first introduction of kindergartens in the United States, concurs, claiming that there is much illusion concerning children’s reading; the book-devouring, which is frequently seen, nowadays, in children, is of no advantage to them . . . the miserable juvenile literature . . . cheats so many poor little things into the idea that they know the sciences, history, biography, and the creations of the imagination.\(^{352}\)

While eighteenth-century children’s books use the tropes of book-eating and “the portable parent” to promote the fiction that their readers are growing up to be free and competent citizens, Emerson, Thoreau, and Peabody identify the ways in which these books secure children’s obedience and, ultimately, their ignorance.

Emerson argues that children’s allegiance to their books leads not only to intellectual incompetence, but to political submissiveness. The young citizen’s reverence for language and law leads to a fundamental misunderstanding of the way that the state functions and keeps citizens subjected: “Republics abound in young civilians, who
believe that the laws make the city . . . and that any measure, though it were absurd, may be imposed on a people.”  

The transcendentalist rejection of the politically childish adult citizen also addressed a mode of subjection that was specific to the nineteenth century: the association between children and slaves. While slavery had been rationalized in seventeenth-century patriarchalism as an inherited status that anyone could theoretically assume, the eighteenth-century argument that all humans were born “freemen” called this idea into question. In the nineteenth century, childhood became a new metaphor through which enslavement could be legitimized.

As Holly Brewer explains, the notion of children’s dependence influenced the revival of patriarchalism in the institution of African slavery:

> [W]hile Locke’s emphasis on equality and reason challenged the legitimacy of slavery, he left . . . a way to justify authority temporarily over children and arguably over all dependents. For those who sought to legitimize slavery under democratic-republican theory, this justification of temporary authority over children provided a means to do so that Locke did not in fact himself take: by comparing enslaved people to children. In the formative period of slavery . . . Africans were compared to children occasionally, as were all subjects within patriarchal theory. Now this comparison assumed a new power and relevance.  

Because of the link between children and slaves, childhood was, in the words of Lesley Ginsberg, “drafted into an undeclared war over the limits of citizenship.” While, on the one hand, childhood was used as a way to exclude slaves from the rights of citizenship, the equation of child and citizen that I have been tracing simultaneously cast citizenship as akin to slavery, making the repudiation of childish readership and citizenship all the more urgent and vexed. Thoreau makes the comparison between white citizens and slaves in Walden (1854): “It is hard to have a southern overseer; it is worse to have a northern one; but worst of all when you are the slave-driver of yourself.” Both the literal slavery
practiced in the south and the metaphorical slavery of the landholder were inseparable from the concept of childhood, which equated dependence with legitimate subjection. The distaste for child readership thus spoke to larger concerns about the legitimacy of enslavement as a cultural institution, likely influencing the transcendentalists’ involvement in abolition.\textsuperscript{357}

The transcendentalists saw the blurred boundaries between citizens, children, and slaves as resulting from the enlightenment’s corruption of language itself, which promoted subjection in the guise of freedom and protection. In the educational process described in chapter two, language provided a bridge between the immanent natural, parental world and the abstract realm of law, citizen, and nation. Children, often represented as female, eventually had to relinquish their attachment to immanently lovable figures such as parents and submit to abstract social norms. Modern nationhood and citizenship relied on this logic of replacement in language, as it allowed for liberty to be resigned through the linguistic act of consent, for the child’s love to signify the citizen’s freedom, and for the nation to be constructed out of words. For the transcendentalists, however, this represented a corruption of the true origin and purpose of language, which was always linked to material, natural objects. As Emerson argues in “Nature” (1836), the use of language to signify empty societal concepts entails an eventual loss of consciousness of the relationship between the word and object, of the fact that “words are the signs of natural facts.”\textsuperscript{358} What results is a diminishment and corruption of language’s true meaning and power:

The corruption of man is followed by the corruption of language. When simplicity of character and the sovereignty of ideas is broken up by the prevalence of secondary desires, the desire of riches, the desire of pleasure, the desire of power,
the desire of praise . . . new imagery ceases to be created and old words are perverted to stand in for things which are not: a paper currency is employed when there is no bullion in the vaults. 359

The transcendentalists’ insight into the emptiness of modern language had the potential for devastating consequences when applied to concepts such as nation, citizen, law, consent and freedom, for these institutions functioned primarily through language.

For Emerson, the state cannot offer real freedom because it is an imaginary and abstract construct. In “Politics,” he argues that educating the child to see the law and the state as real, fixed objects that can be signified in definitive language disguises the fact that both are contingent and in flux, detached from natural reality:

In dealing with the state, we ought to remember that its institutions are not aboriginal, though they existed before we were born: that they are not superior to the citizen . . . that they all are imitable, all alterable; we may make as good; we may make better. Society is an illusion to the young citizen. It lies before him in rigid repose, with certain names, men, institutions, rooted like oat trees to the centre, round which all arrange themselves the best they can. But the old statesman knows that there are no roots and centres. 360

While “names” and even people may be connected to the maneuvers of the state in the childish citizen’s mind, making it seem as if the law is “rooted” in nature, this is a misperception that keeps the citizen from discovering that abstract concepts such as law have no fixed or natural basis. For Emerson, this inability to perceive the hollowness at the center of the law is a problem because it stops citizens from demanding the natural freedom that the truly mature citizen must possess.

In the nineteenth century, the abstraction of language had been taken to its extreme in educational innovations such as the spelling book, causing ever greater concern about the citizen’s illiteracy and childishness. These textbooks claimed that they helped children to “get acquainted” with language by repeating all of the letters by name
before finally pronouncing the entire word, but they resulted more often in a hodgepodge of disconnected and abstract alphabet sounds than a phonetic “sounding out” the word. For instance, “See-Ay-Tee” was more likely to phonetically suggest “Sadie” or “Katie” than “Cat.” As “friendly” introductions to abstract language, these texts were often conceived as tools of the state; politician and educator Noah Webster argued that an American spelling book would produce a unified nation of readers, brought together by their common pronunciation and affection for the national language. Largely as a result of Webster’s efforts, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed the rapid rise of the spelling book method as the primary means of teaching literacy. Spelling books came to rival primers as the most popular children’s books, with press runs as high as 20,000 copies. By the time that Emerson and Thoreau were writing, spelling books had become an indispensable part of children’s reading education. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the common use of the spelling book had become both mechanical and repetitive, making its part in the training of docile citizens more apparent and ominous. Critics began to notice that children’s spelling sessions resembled a drone of meaningless sounds rather than thought-out expressions of meaning, creating pupils who were characterized by the emptiness of their language and their inability to connect words to their significance.

Thoreau’s depiction of Americans repeating “a b abs” specifically alludes to the popularity of the spelling book method and its creation of rote readers. His disapproval of this method is not surprising given the transcendentalists’ investment in concrete language. Spelling books were the ultimate example of the ways in which language had become separate from meaning. “Reading naturally” had come to refer to the ability to
pronounce words aloud rather than to comprehend them. Because of the emphasis on pronunciation rather than comprehension, students varied greatly in their ability to understand the books that they read. As E. Jennifer Monaghan points out, many nineteenth-century children who could read could not write—and many of those who did have some writing skills did not understand language well enough to create their own compositions. Thus, the problems with child readership that Emerson and Thoreau describe were not merely metaphorical, but represented a crisis in American education and citizenship. The problem of the citizen’s and reader’s incompetence was becoming a problem too large to be ignored. As Emerson prophesized, the “fraud will be manifest” and words will lose “all of their power to stimulate the understanding or the affections.”

‘Infancy Conforms to Nobody’: The Child Reader Reinvented

Nevertheless, the child reader was to be redeemed, or was, more accurately, to become a figure of national redemption, the catalyst for a new paradigm shift in the American politics of childhood and readership. For the transcendentalists, the answer to the problem of American readers’ incompetence was to redefine American education and its use of language, reclaiming child readers as emancipators of subjected “adult child” citizens. Borrowing the language of rebirth from sentimental and evangelical movements of the time, Thoreau writes:

It is not enough to speak the language of that nation by which [books] are written, for there is a memorable interval between the language heard and the language read. The one is commonly transitory, a sound, a tongue, a dialect merely, almost brutish and we learn it unconsciously, like the brutes, of our mothers. The other is the maturity and experience of that; if that is our mother tongue, this is our father
tongue, a reserved and selected expression, too significant to be heard by ear, which we must be born again in order to speak.\textsuperscript{365}

As this passage suggests, true maturity as a reader means understanding language beyond the feminized national “spelling book” modes of reading that Thoreau has dismissed as “childish.” Yet, by Thoreau’s paradoxical turn of phrase, maturity also relies upon becoming a new kind of reader who, as the language of being “born again” suggests, is still strongly marked as childlike. Thoreau’s image of rebirth as the key to maturity hints at one of the strangest aspects of the nineteenth-century rejection of the child reader; that is, that it was coupled with a notion that children were in fact the best readers. The notion of rebirth allowed the transcendentalists and other nineteenth-century writers to revise the child’s role in the traditional narrative of citizenship. Child readers, they insinuated, would save citizenship by inspiring Americans to become self-reliant adults and readers.

Despite the growing antipathy towards America’s childish reputation in nineteenth-century public discourse, positive images of child readers appeared in a number of the major works of the period. For example, despite his dismissive attitude toward children’s literature, it is a child reader who Melville claims orchestrated his reading of Hawthorne’s work: “a mountain girl, a cousin of mine . . . this delightful creature, this charming Cherry.”\textsuperscript{366} As the phrase “mountain girl,” as well as the name “Cherry” suggests, Melville’s girl reader is not a schoolgirl, but a child of nature, like the book she gives him, which is “verdantly bound, and garnished with a curious frontispiece in green—nothing less than a fragment of real moss cunningly pressed to a flyleaf.” Similarly, Emerson’s work is filled with positive images of children who symbolize self-sufficiency, clear sightedness, and national potential, though unlike Cherry they are
almost always male, a reflection of the extent to which the Lockean equation of freedom and subjection had become popularized through the image of the feminized child reader.

In “Self-Reliance” (1841), Emerson uses children as key examples of what nonconformist behavior should look like:

What pretty oracles nature yields us on this text in the face and behavior of children, babes, and even brutes . . . Their mind being whole, their eye is at yet unconquered, and when we look in their faces, we are disconcerted. Infancy conforms to nobody, all conform to it, so that one babe commonly makes four or five out of the adults who prattle and play to it.³⁶⁷

As this passage suggests, it is the child who, for Emerson, has true liberty and power in the face of a generally conformist system. He finds the greatest expression of freedom in little boys: “the nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner, and would disdain as much as a lord to do or say aught to conciliate one, is the healthy attitude of human nature.”³⁶⁸ This kind of boy is “the master of society, independent, irresponsible.”³⁶⁹ The difference between this masculine image and the female child readers of the eighteenth century suggests that to reclaim reading as an act of power, Emerson must redefine what it means to be a child reader.

As the nonchalant little boy’s refusal to cater to the expectations of society suggests, the positive images of children in transcendentalist work are more likely to favor disobedient, rebellious children than traditionally good children who love their books. Due to the disconnectedness of modern language from nature, Emerson reverses the typical command to “love one’s book”: “I hate books, they are a usurpation of importance. I cannot once go home to truth and nature for this perpetual clatter of words and dust of libraries.”³⁷⁰ He even goes so far as to challenge the Bible as reading material because “it is a book and not alive”—a sentiment that he would repeat in his “Divinity
School Address,” given to young ministers.\textsuperscript{371} To Emerson, it is no longer “bad,” but admirable to hate one’s books. The best men of the age, he claims, are “childlike” because they do not conform to society’s rules, but “set at naught books and traditions.”\textsuperscript{372}

Yet reading was still a necessary part of a transcendentalist social model, as writers were loath to embrace the immorality and barbarism associated with illiteracy in the popular imagination—even though, as Graff has argued, illiterates were actually remarkably resourceful in participating in “civilized” society.\textsuperscript{373} Peabody, for instance, was quick to disassociate herself from any semblance of promoting illiteracy, despite her own frustration with children’s reading practices and belief that kindergarten children were too young to read. In \textit{A Record of a School} (1835), a book that recounts her observation of Bronson Alcott’s pedagogical experiments, she notes that his reputation as someone who “does not think it important for children to learn to read at all” is not true. Rather, she claims that “all his plans of teaching, keep steadily in mind the object of making books live, breathe, and speak.”\textsuperscript{374} Peabody argues, nonetheless, that a new approach to children’s literacy is desperately needed, for “children’s books are not often works of genius” and thus very few nourish “the spiritual life.”\textsuperscript{375}

Circuiting the pedagogue’s need to make “dead” books “live,” Emerson and Thoreau address this problem by encouraging Americans to “read” nature itself instead of books. In Cherry’s case, the glory of Hawthorne’s book was measured by its resemblance to a piece of moss. Emerson, in a similar but inverted image, compares nature to a book: “By degrees we may come to know the primitive sense of the objects of nature, so that the world will be to us an open book, and every form significant of its hidden life and
final cause.” Thoreau too makes this comparison, noting that in the woods he has “more than ever come within the influence of those books which circulate round the world, whose sentences were first written on bark.” As these images suggest, the transcendentalists believed that they could reinvigorate the reading experience by returning to a symbolic language based on nature itself.

While spiritual and mental concepts are foremost in importance for Emerson, these concepts gain meaning by attaching themselves to material referents, not by remaining abstract: “Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture.” Emerson thus reverses the process of abstraction found in American citizenship training, favoring instead a process of embodiment in language, which similarly takes its exemplary manifestation in an image of the parent. Emerson explains, “Spirit is the Creator . . . And man in all ages and countries, embodies it in his language, as the Father.” Here, instead of moving from a concrete experience of the father to a projection of that experience onto national authority and law, the individual has a concrete experience of a natural phenomenon that merely takes its creative expression in the symbolism of parent and child. Thus, while the literate subject remains figuratively a child, language is not an externally imposed system that must be internalized, but an expression of internal convictions that are based on experience.

Emerson’s redefinition of how language should work has significant implications in the context of the citizenship training that I have described in previous chapters, for the attention to primary experience as a precursor to language allows citizens to demand
constant experiential evidence of their freedom. As Elizabeth B. Clark observes, freedom for Emerson requires “constant, vigorous moral scrutiny and interrogations of authority.”

Perhaps surprisingly given his rejection of the child reader elsewhere, the child is Emerson’s foremost example of this experiential freedom. Emerson argues that the ability to reassert the connection between direct experience and language relies upon one’s “simplicity,” which is robbed by the modern system of education. Children, in particular, have the power to experience nature, and to read natural language, in its truest form: “The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child.” Due to their direct relationship with nature, Emerson believed that children’s speech could be a model for restoring the forgotten links between word and nature, sign, and reality:

Most of the process [by which language describes natural experience] is hidden from us in the remote time when language was framed, but the same tendency may be daily observed in children. Children and savages use only nouns or names of things, which they continually convert into verbs, and apply to analogous mental acts.

Notably, in Emerson’s description, children transform “things,” which are inert or stagnant, into “verbs,” or actions. In “Politics” (1844), he describes free citizenship not as something that one is, or has become through some ancient moment of consent, but as something one does through a constant experience and expression of self-reliant freedom.

Emerson’s view of the child allows him to reject a consensual political model, which he considers conformist, and to imagine an alternate version of citizenship that requires neither consent nor submission. He suggests that by reading and following the lessons of nature as children do, individuals will spontaneously form an organic and self-reliant body of citizens living in a state of natural freedom. While each citizen is self-
governing, “simple” or childlike readings of nature allow the group to identify common virtues to guide their actions. Emerson explains that this intuitive, natural reading will prevent disunion and antinomianism, as nature is a “discipline” that provides moral accord consistent with the citizen’s natural liberty. Eventually, the development of individual character through the reading of nature makes the state and its books “unnecessary.”

In Emerson’s model, “the wise man is the state . . . He needs no library, for he has not done thinking; no church, for he is a prophet; no statute book, for he has the lawgiver.” In this way, Emerson has effectively removed the child and citizen from the constraints enacted by nineteenth-century reading practices, proposing a new model of reading outside of traditional models of citizenship and readership altogether.

As a reflection of their belief in the child’s role as the most effective reader of nature, transcendentalist authors promoted child-centered modes of reading, which granted children unprecedented authority regarding the meaning of texts. For example, Alcott taught children to read by allowing them to ponder and even teach their own interpretations of books such as the Bible. What often emerged from his controversial teaching methods was a kind of reverse catechizing, which he describes in his *Conversations with Children on the Gospels* (1836-1837). In this text, Alcott reads the Bible to a group of children and then asks for their impressions of the stories within. Instead of expecting fixed answers, like the catechizer, Alcott encourages creative interpretations and records them without correction. Often, several interpretations of one story are given without Alcott offering an “official” interpretation. Despite the unorthodoxy of some of the answers, Alcott does not privilege any one over the other and
does not even correct children with whom the rest of the class disagrees. Instead, Alcott attempts to avoid any direction of the children’s answers. For instance, when Peabody objects that his questions have led to an answer that does not seem natural for the children, Alcott answers that she is right and that it is better to “give the subject to the children and let them lead us where they will.” In “Education” (1840), Emerson makes a similar suggestion: “if one of the young people says a wise thing, greet it, and let all the children clap their hands . . . if a boy stops you in your speech, cries out that you are wrong and sets you right, hug him!”

Yet, while this new model of the child and citizen differs significantly from the images found in the novel and in nineteenth-century periodicals, the persistence of the citizen’s childishness in Emerson’s social model hints at the limitations of that model in creating a radically emancipated adult mode of American readership and citizenship. Though Emerson attempts to rid citizenship of submission, he ultimately retains the Lockean goal of incorporating all readers into one voice. For instance, in “Self-Reliance,” he speaks of the inevitable “resolution of all into the ever blessed ONE,” an image that he would often revisit in his writing. Emerson is thus able to create the illusion that no submission or consent is required to create a unified citizenship only because, as Elizabeth Hewitt points out, “there is ultimately no distinction between the interests of the one and the interests of the many. Because all interests are the same, ‘the citizens find [themselves] in perfect agreement.’” For Emerson, social unification is not the result of a compact, but of the citizen’s ability to read the natural law, which contains its own code of virtue.
Accordingly, the child, who instigates the citizen’s turn to Emerson’s model of
citizenship, becomes a figure of this “natural” unification through reading. Children are
convenient for this purpose because they are simultaneously free from cultural constraints
and from the typical markings of individualism. Children are “blank,” or in Emerson’s
language “simple,” with little opportunity to develop competing points of view. Getting
in touch with one’s self-reliant inner child paradoxically entails an erasure of one’s
individual interests in favor of the larger machinations of nature and what Emerson calls
“Intuition” or the “Soul.” Children’s reading of nature is thus not a radical break from
their reading of the spelling book, in that both lead to a unified articulation of citizenship.

Despite his reluctance to direct children’s reading, Alcott’s disciplinary practices
reflect the ways in which even the child’s natural literacy can be employed to preserve
subjection and “voluntary” social hierarchy. Peabody observes that his method of child
governance is “very autocratic.” She explains, however, that his practices have
evolved through a careful study of “the voice of nature,” making them compatible with
the transcendentalist rejection of oppressive textual authority:

Mr. Alcott’s autocracy . . . is drawn from experience and observation; and I
should add, it continually takes counsel from its sources. And is not this a
legitimate autocracy, in the moral sense of the word? Are not the laws of human
nature sufficiently intelligible, to enable sensibility, and observation, and years of
experience, to construct a system, whose general principles need not be reviewed,
in every instance of application to every scholar?

In addition to consulting the “laws of nature” in punishing his students, Alcott consults
the students themselves, whose agreement that punishment is needed substantiates the
“intelligibleness” of nature’s unquestionable authority, as well as their status as “natural”
child readers who have the capacity to understand nature’s truths. Peabody notes that,
after theorizing with Alcott, the children never fail to consent to discipline as a “general principle.”

Alcott’s choice of punishment—depriving children from reading—demonstrates the extent to which literacy instruction supports children’s submission to this “naturalized” authority:

One morning, when he was opening Pilgrim’s Progress to read, he said, that those who had whispered, or broken any rule since they came into school, might rise to be punished. They expected punishment with the ferule; about a dozen rose. He told them to go into the anti-room, and stay there, while he was reading. They did so. The reading was interesting, though it had been read before; for every new reading brings new associations, and peculiar conversation. Those in the anti-room, could hear the occasional bursts of feeling which the reading and conversation elicited. A lady, who was present, went out, just before the reading closed, and found those who had been sent out, sitting in the anti-room . . . Nothing is so interesting as Pilgrim’s Progress, and the conversations, said one. We would have rather been punished in any other way, said another.391

Though Alcott’s standard for punishment is obedience to the laws of nature rather than to the laws of the state, the privilege of reading still requires the prerequisite of specific good behaviors. The children in the classroom, whose good behavior codes them as competent readers of nature, are allowed to express their own readings of the text, while those in the anti-room are left out. While the “bad” children are not forced to submit or even necessarily coaxed into submission, the lesson learned here is that those children who do not agree with Alcott’s reading of natural discipline are excluded from the discussion altogether. Their quarantine in the “anti-room” provides a practical example of the consequences of transcendentalism’s erasure of dissent in the natural child.
Hawthorne: Taming the Natural Child Reader

Hawthorne, who “wrote more pieces directly aimed at a juvenile audience than any other canonical male author of the period,” engages more directly with the contradictions and tensions inherent within the paradigm of natural childhood, and so demands a place in this chapter, even though he would resist simple categorization in either of the literary movements discussed.\textsuperscript{392} Hawthorne’s ambivalence regarding the transcendentalist project is well documented, as is his disdain for the sentimental “scribbling women” of the period. Yet, his stories for children often employ an idealized image of childhood that is consistent with the transcendentalist re-imagination of the child as a liberated figure. Similarly, as Karen Sánchez-Eppler has noted, Hawthorne’s work for children also had much in common with that of the “scribbling women” that he is famous for denouncing.\textsuperscript{393} His flirtation with these two influential movements allows him to act as a particularly effective commentator on the new model of childhood, meditating particularly on what he saw as the common problems posed by the “natural” child.

Though Hawthorne claimed that he only wrote children’s books for money, the figure of the natural child was likely attractive to him because of its relevance to what was a lasting preoccupation in his work: the tension between individual conscience and obedience to social constraints. Lewis, Sacvan Bercovitch, and others have expounded upon this tension as it relates to \textit{The Scarlet Letter} (1850), but Hawthorne’s children’s literature was an equally rich venue for his explorations.\textsuperscript{394} Through his depictions of “natural” children, Hawthorne tests the viability of certain social institutions, such as education, but ultimately suggests that Emerson’s model of consent-free unification fails
to account for the irregularity of children’s tastes, as well as the chaotic forces within the human soul. He concludes that constraints are necessary to prevent the destabilization of society. This realization was, for him, at once comforting and tragic, yet another sign that, as Sophia remarked about *The Scarlet Letter*, “the Law cannot be broken.” To make the notion of natural childhood compatible with the ultimate need for submission, Hawthorne considers two possibilities, which will also become the dominant narratives of the sentimental: the free and innocent child must either grow up to be constrained, or must secure her own status outside of citizenship by demanding the moral constraint of others.

Hawthorne shared many of the criticisms of nineteenth-century education that the transcendentalists voiced. He begins his children’s book, *A Wonder Book for Boys and Girls* (1851), with an observation reminiscent of Emerson and Thoreau’s arguments about the American schoolhouse reader. He describes his child storyteller, Eustace Bright, as a scholar whose eyes have become bad because of too much schoolhouse reading: “A trouble in his eyesight (such as many students think it is necessary to have, nowadays, in order to prove their diligence at their books) had kept him from college a week or two after the beginning of the term.” Eustace is a primary example of American education gone wrong, his blurry eyes demonstrating the ways in which the typical uses of reading lead not to liberty or even to education, but to debilitation. Yet Hawthorne emphasizes the natural child’s ability to resist this limited view of education by remarking that “for my part, I have seldom met with a pair of eyes that looked as if they could see farther or better than those of Eustace Bright.” In this second claim, Hawthorne suggests that even though school has blinded Eustace, he has retained the
powers inherent within the child’s natural vision of the world. He later notes that Eustace, even at age twenty, “was just as much a boy as when you became first acquainted with him.” As a child reader and teller of tales, Eustace offers a revitalized encounter with language to his young listeners. He decides to tell stories from Greek myth, which he complains have been lost to the “grey-bearded grandsires.” By revising the Greek stories into children’s tales, Eustace seeks to reclaim language from the schoolhouse and make it new again through its contact with nature and with natural children. His child listeners are likewise unspoiled, taking their names from nature, such as Primrose and Cowslip.

Hawthorne’s revision of the story of King Midas reiterates popular arguments regarding the childishness and illiteracy of American readers. Like Emerson’s childish adult reader who no longer can see the meaning of language because he uses it to signify only empty societal concepts, Midas is out of touch with nature, a problem that leads, among other things, to his inability to read altogether. When his daughter Marigold brings him flowers, he thinks only of what they would be worth in terms of economic transactions if they were made of gold. He looks at his garden “only to calculate how much the garden would be worth if each of the innumerable rose-petals were a thin plate of gold.” In passages such as this, “The Golden Touch” echoes Emerson’s complaints that human language and interactions are corrupted by “the desire of riches, the desire of pleasure, the desire of power, the desire of praise,” as well as many authors’ concerns that Americans only cared about books as status symbols rather than as objects with aesthetic value. Eventually, of course, Midas becomes so misguided by his inability to perceive the true meaning of things that he decides to make everything literally into gold, stripping the world of its meaning and, literally, of its life.
Linking the classic myth to the nineteenth-century debates surrounding the American reader, Hawthorne uses the popular imagery of childish adulthood to describe Midas. He notes that Midas’ mind, on the eve of getting the “golden touch,” was “in the state of a child’s, to whom a beautiful new plaything has been promised in the morning.” Like the children described in *The Port-Folio* and *The Microscope*, what Midas believes will give him power actually leaves him illiterate. One of the first objects that Midas transforms into gold is a book:

> He took up a book from the table. At his first touch, it assumed the appearance of such a splendidly bound and gilt-edged volume as one often meets with nowadays; but on running his finger through the leaves, behold! it was a bundle of thin golden plates, in which all the wisdom of the book had grown illegible.

Midas’ golden book is a symbol of the American reader’s incompetence, foregrounding the ways in which language has become detached from natural meaning. The American reader’s childishness was a personal issue for Hawthorne in writing this text. He frequently expressed dismay about how readers’ dulled tastes had affected his ability to sell his adult books, leading to his involvement in more lucrative children’s projects such as *A Wonder Book*.

Midas’ imagined solution to his illiteracy—that his daughter Marigold can read to him— hints at the solution that the transcendentalists also pose. As Marigold’s name signifies, she herself is figured as a part of the natural world and, as such, she instantly recognizes the problems with Midas’ transformation of reality into empty economic currency. When Midas turns his garden into gold, Marigold offers an alternate reading of the yellow roses by claiming that they are “blighted and spoilt.” In the end, Marigold acts as Midas’ emancipator; it is only after her transformation into a golden statue that he
realizes his mistake. Through this loss, Midas learns to live, as Emerson’s self-reliant man does, “with nature in the present.” After he has proven that he has learned his lesson, Marigold is restored to him and together they turn the roses back to their “beautiful bloom.”

Of course, Hawthorne’s location of this lesson in a story about a monarch has already begun to deflate some of the transcendentalist child reader’s more radical implications for American citizenship. Midas begins and ends the story as a king and therefore has no need to create the alternate version of the state that the transcendentalists theorized. Other stories in A Wonder Book suggest that Hawthorne remained dissatisfied with the modes of natural childhood and citizenship posed by Emerson and Thoreau. Reflecting his ambivalence about transcendentalism and about idealistic movements in general, Hawthorne’s idealized portraits of children are often accompanied by skepticism about the child’s ability to promote a unified culture without the force of constraint.

“The Paradise of Children,” which appears later in the text, hints that the transcendentalist vision of a nation led by “natural” children will lead to various social evils. The story is a retelling of the story of Pandora’s box, but unlike the original story, it casts all of its characters as children. The paradisiacal society in which the children live approximates the world that might result from a population consisting of Emerson’s nonchalant little boys: “Then, everybody was a child. There needed no fathers and mothers to take care of the children . . . and there was plenty to eat and drink. Whenever a child wanted his dinner, he found it growing on a tree.” Living in an inverse situation to the Lockean pre-government “state of war,” the children do not seem at first to need a social compact or rulers in order to be “free.” Instead, they are able to coexist peacefully
without the intervention of law: “What was the most wonderful of all, the children never quarreled among themselves; neither had they any crying fits.” Ultimately, however, Hawthorne’s problematizes this model of society by foregrounding the ways in which even “natural” children are not immune to the influence of selfishness, jealousy, and greed. Children, Hawthorne seems to suggest, may be even more susceptible to these passions than adults—after all, the story claims that it is a child who unleashes the negative influences of passion upon the world. In the end, Pandora and her friend Epithmetheus are not self-reliant citizens, but “naughty” children, a term that Hawthorne also uses throughout *A Wonder Book* to describe some of Eustace’s child listeners. While Hawthorne (via Eustace) claims that he is glad that Pandora opened the box, perhaps as a result of his own fascination with the darker passions of humankind, the story also suggests that humans (and especially children) are in need of regulation in order to prevent chaos.

The frame story of *A Wonder Book* explicitly links Hawthorne’s concerns about the antinomian potentials of natural citizenship to his anxieties about children’s reading specifically. “The Paradise of Children” is framed as a disciplinary tale, told in response to the “bad reading” of Primrose, one of Eustace’s “naughty” listeners. Primrose undermines Emerson’s model of a natural citizenship established through reading by demonstrating that the interpretations of so-called “natural” children are not homogenous, but are frequently incompatible or even hostile to each other. She often expresses negative commentary and rejects Eustace’s conclusions in favor of her own. For example, after “The Gorgon’s Head,” Primrose critiques Eustace’s telling of events:
As to [the three Gray Women’s] one tooth . . . there was nothing so very wonderful in that. I suppose it was a false tooth. But think of your turning Mercury into Quicksilver, and talking of his sister. You are too ridiculous!”

In her objections, Primrose is a stand-in for the actual readers of Hawthorne’s text, whose acquiescence to the text also could not be ensured. Though her objections to Eustace often lead to humorous exchanges among the children, she represents a very real threat to the community that is being created in the text through the children’s shared explorations of nature. Her attempts to interrupt the stories and assert her own knowledge frequently endanger the telling, as when Eustace threatens to “bite the story short off between my teeth, and swallow the untold part” at the slightest interruption. “The Paradise of Children,” in turn, wreaks a kind of poetic justice upon Primrose, and by extension any child who dares to be a resistant reader; Eustace remarks that the story will show how paradise was destroyed “by the naughtiness of just such as little imp as Primrose here.”

Through the disciplining of Primrose, Hawthorne suggests that a model of society based on children’s natural reading is both impossible and insufficient. Child readers, particularly flighty ones such as Primrose, cannot be fully trusted to read correctly or uniformly without disciplinary intervention. The frame story surrounding “The Paradise of Children” provides an example of how this discipline might happen through books, as it is this tale that begins Primrose’s gradual surrender to the authority of Eustace and his stories. While *A Wonder Book* begins with Primrose threatening to fall asleep when Eustace tells a tale, she is soon requesting the tales herself, albeit in a way that attempts to disguise her true investment in them. Before the Pandora story, she tells Eustace for your comfort, we will listen to another of your old stories . . . Perhaps I will like them better now when there is nothing to do, than while there were nuts to be gathered and beautiful weather to be enjoyed.
In the end, it is Primrose who encourages Eustace to tell his final tale on the top of bald-
summit, claiming that “now that we are up among the clouds, we can believe
anything.” As the cloaking of Primrose’s submission in seemingly independent and
even resistant language suggests, Hawthorne remains invested in the image of self-reliant
childhood promoted by the transcendentalists. Yet, his text asserts what Emerson’s does
not: the unification of readers and citizens through reading requires submission.

The possibility that “natural” children might be bad readers was a frequent
preoccupation for Hawthorne, meriting refined strategies of re-assimilation. In
Grandfather’s Chair, he stages another scene of a “naughty” reader’s discipline and
incorporation. The disciplining of the child reader is especially significant to this
particular text because Hawthorne had reservations about the text’s reception by actual
children. He notes in his preface:

The author’s great doubt is, whether he has succeeded in writing a book which
will be readable by the class for whom he intends it. To make a lively and
entertaining narrative for children with such unmalleable material as is presented
by the somber, stern, and rigid characteristics of the Puritans and their
descendants is quite as difficult an attempt as to manufacture delicate playthings
out of the granite rocks on which New England is founded.

In the text, the possibility for resistant readership is represented by Charley, who gallops
away on a broomstick during the grandfather’s early tales and who frequently interrupts
the tales to voice his disagreement with his grandfather. For instance, he reacts to his
grandfather’s tragic depiction of the burning of Tory homes in the Revolution by saying
that he would rather celebrate with the rebels than mourn the losses of the enemy.
Charley’s outbursts and inattention, like those of Primrose, endanger the model of social
cohesion promoted by both the tales and the story’s frame narrative. Early on, Hawthorne
notes that the grandfather would not have even continued the story had it not been for his other, more amiable listeners, Nathaniel, Clara, and Alice (though the latter also frequently endangers the tales’ reception by falling asleep). But eventually, the story assimilates Charley into both its “little society” of readers and the unified national community that the grandfather’s historical tales establish. The grandfather begins this process by insisting that Charley specifically consent to hear the tales before he will continue telling them. Over time, Charley begins to ask for the stories without prompting and ends up signifying his deep investment in the tales by his decision to name his sled “Grandfather’s Chair.”

Readerly unification is, for Hawthorne, a difficult and lengthy process, not what he would have surely seen as the “naïve” natural unification that Emerson envisions. While Charley remains somewhat rambunctious and wild throughout the text, Hawthorne suggests that natural childhood is possible only as long as it can coexist with the reader’s discipline.

Of course, the most famous instance of the natural child’s bad readership occurs in *The Scarlet Letter*, a text that hints at a different possibility for the “natural” child than her own reincorporation. Pearl, like Primrose, expresses her resistance to her culture through bad reading. But instead of narrating her capitulation to the catechism, Hawthorne suggests that Pearl cannot be made amenable to rules, even when her ability to remain with her mother depends on it. Rather than depicting Pearl’s assimilation into Puritan society, he allows her to remain outside of society. She does not promote lawlessness but instead becomes an *exterior* force of social unification. Even though she will not give the primer authority over her own existence, she supports Puritan authority as the privileged reader of the letter that symbolizes Hester’s sin. By internalizing the
child reader of the “A,” or as Bercovitch puts it “by learning to play Pearl to her own former Hester,” Hester willingly remains in the town long after her punishment has been completed. Pearl, on the other hand, is able to flourish outside of the community altogether, promoting the Puritan reading of the “A” without surrendering to its textual power herself. In his depiction of Pearl, Hawthorne thus theorizes an alternative capacity for the natural child reader: the ability to regulate citizenship from a position fundamentally outside of it.

In the last story of A Wonder Book, “The Chimæra,” Hawthorne offers a similar parable of the natural child as a force of moral regulation, effectively substituting this version of regulatory childhood for those found in the earlier stories of the text. In the story, an adventurer named Bellerophon goes searching for the Pegasus, a creature who symbolizes natural freedom and self reliance: “He had no mate; he never had been backed or bridled by a master; and, for many a long year, he led a solitary and a happy life.” Nonetheless, Bellerophon wants to train the Pegasus so that he can use it for the good of society, which requires the defeat of a horrible beast called the Chimæra. Because the Pegasus is an untamed part of nature, Bellerophon must find it by aligning himself with someone who is still in touch with nature: a child. In this narrative, the child is able to remain free and unconstrained, but the primary aim of Bellerophon’s mission is still disciplinary: to convince the Pegasus to accept a human rider. The natural child imagines and orchestrates the taming of the Pegasus: “I wish he would come down, and take me on his back and let me ride him up to the moon!”

Enabled by the child’s ability to determine the Pegasus’s movements, Bellerophon finally manages to find Pegasus and put a bridle on his jaws:
it was almost a sadness to see so wild a creature grow suddenly so tame. . . But when Bellerophon patted his head and spoke a few authoritative, yet kind and soothing words, another look came into the eyes of Pegasus; for he was glad at heart, after so many lonely centuries, to have found a companion and a master. Thus it always is with winged horses, and with all such wild and solitary creatures. If you can catch and overcome them, it is the surest way to their love. 418

The discipline sticks. Even after they have killed the Chimæra, Pegasus will not leave Bellerophon: he “rested his head on Bellerophon’s shoulder and would not be persuaded to take flight.” 419 This image of the Pegasus reassuming his own bridle remarkably resembles the moment in The Scarlet Letter in which Hester decides to remain in Boston and wear the “A” on her own accord, and both scenes fittingly represent a new understanding of discipline, in which the child inspires the acquiescence of others.

Similar to the way in which seemingly subversive Pearl coerces her mother to reassume the “A” in the forest with Dimmesdale, the young boy is at the center of Bellerophon’s attempts to tame Pegasus, for as Bellerophon says, “Thou, my beloved friend, hast done it all.” 420 This natural child represents disciplinary force, a role that grants him considerable agency, but also distances him from the likely capacities of actual child readers.

As the story of Bellerophon and the Pegagus ends, Hawthorne allows the boy in the story to supplant Primrose (who perhaps represents the “actual child reader”) as the text’s primary model of the child, effectively creating what would come to be a paradigmatic sentimental narrative: in which a child outside of society enforces the constraint of a child within it. When Eustace finishes his telling, Primrose is in tears: “for she was conscious of something in the legend which the rest of them were not yet old enough to feel.” 421 While Hawthorne’s narrator claims that Primrose is crying because the tale represents the “imaginative enterprise of youth,” she also seems to be “conscious
of” the way in which the child’s “imaginative” freedom eventually requires not only that magical horses be tamed, but that adults accept a variety of social bridles. As Primrose becomes no longer a child reader, but an adult, her tears enact her final surrender to the power of Eustace’s stories. These tears anticipate the affective technology by which the child gains increasing influence as a disciplinary agent in the sentimental. The pleas of innocent children would come to demand citizens’ tears, creating a citizenship unified by sentimental distress over the child’s innocence and vulnerability.

‘Feel Right,’ Read Right: The Sentimental Child Reader

Encompassing multiple genres, including children’s books, novels, periodical pieces, and poetry, sentimentalism was perhaps less unified as a literary phenomenon than any of the other moments in American book history that I have discussed. Yet, in terms of actual nineteenth-century children’s reading practices, the sentimental genre was far more influential than either transcendentalism or the masculine authorship represented by Hawthorne and Melville. Production figures rival those of early children’s textbooks and novels; Maria Cummins’s *The Lamplighter* (1854), for instance, sold 40,000 copies in its first month and 60,000 more in its first year, while *The Scarlet Letter* sold fewer than 10,000 in Hawthorne’s lifetime. The female writers that have come to be known as “sentimental” worked from a common set of plots, as well as a set of newly-developed assumptions about the relationship between childhood, morality, and citizenship. Sentimentalism was particularly instrumental in popularizing the new paradigm of childhood that I have been tracing in this chapter, in which children were considered “free” and “innocent” of the constraints associated with adulthood. Sentimental images of
children could be used to lodge compelling social critiques, questioning the repressive social structures that led to poverty and slavery, as well as the seeming powerlessness of common citizens in the face of the law. As Nina Baym has observed, the most frequent plot of sentimental fiction was the dilemma caused by “mistreatment, unfairness, disadvantage, and powerlessness, recurrent injustices occasioned by [the heroine’s] status as female and child.” Through her endurance of victimization and trauma, the sentimental child came to act as a privileged witness to American culture, beckoning citizens to end her suffering by reading and “feeling right.”

The social models suggested by sentimental childhood were often directly opposed the current system as represented by the law. As Karen Sánchez-Eppler has noted, sentimentalism was defined by what nineteenth-century reformers called “moral suasion,” which assumes that obedience to the law is no longer sufficient to inspire true morality. Instead, the people must be unified by emotional, natural, and “divine” truths that may or may not be represented in current legal discourse. The law (or lack thereof) is frequently understood as opposed to the bonds that unite citizens through feelings and values, as in the case of the abolition and temperance movements. Childhood could be appropriated as a site of natural truth because children’s supposed freedom from the constraints and blind spots of adulthood allowed them to “feel right” naturally. Simultaneously, the notion of the child as a natural reader served to civilize those same aims, preventing them from being mistaken for social anarchy or antinomianism. A claim to civilized restraint, if not always lawfulness, was particularly important to sentimentalist writers. While the transcendentalists’ alternative version of citizenship was imagined as a way to elude submission (or, at the very least, to write it out as a central
factor of social unification), sentimental citizenship highlights submission to God and nature as its central tenet. Sentimentalists suggest that reading of the natural world and, of course, the Bible ensures this submission even without a strict adherence to human law.

This emphasis on submission was perhaps one reason why sentimental writers maintained the female child as its primary icon. Even so, for sentimental heroines such as Warner’s Ellen and Cummins’s Gerty, submission constitutes a lifelong struggle that, despite its supposed naturalness, requires training in specific modes of reading. Other sentimental children such as Stowe’s Little Eva exhibit natural submission to God, but are often excused from full adult constraints due to their early deaths. These “heaven-bound” children’s ability to read the Bible and the world becomes a regulatory force for adult citizens and other children like Stowe’s slave figure, Topsy, who acts perhaps as a more likely stand-in for actual readers (though, of course, a complicated one due to her racial status). Eva’s “freedom” is ultimately revealed to be inseparable from her role in enforcing moral order through the perceived endangerment of that freedom, as well as her innocence. As Eva does not live long enough to assume the yoke of adult constraints, it is Topsy who must restrain her rebellious propensities and grow into a respectable Christian woman. In their negative images of each other, Eva and Topsy perfectly represent the nineteenth-century split between the natural child reader and the incompetent child reader. But in Stowe’s re-imagining of the child as both innocent and endangered, the two children are revealed to be two halves of a similar intention, as one cries out for the unified national feelings and reading practices that the other bears the burden of realizing.

Sentimentalism often locates children’s literacy outside of typical institutions of subjection, such as the school and law, but reading nonetheless secures their submission
to a unified “natural” morality. A classic instance of a sentimental reader is Ellen of Warner’s wildly popular *The Wide, Wide World* (1850).⁴²⁴ The text notably begins with the rigid presence of the law; Ellen’s father’s loss of a lawsuit sets the text’s events in motion. Yet Ellen herself is quickly separated from this world dictated by law, gain, and loss; she is sent to live in the natural space of Aunt Fortune’s farm, and so becomes located in a critical vantage point outside of society. From here, she can critique the unchristian habits of the rich, who thrive on pleasure and exploit the poor.⁴²⁵ But Ellen’s reading of nature and her Bible prevents her from equating her natural freedom with social and moral permissiveness. As Elizabeth Fekete Trubey has observed, Ellen’s reading is “a vehicle that teaches women a method of reading that is potentially disruptive” and “a conveyor of a widely-accepted notion of womanhood.” ⁴²⁶ While Trubey argues the text is conflicted about whether it wants to promote freedom or subjection, the tension she notes is ultimately not so much a conflict as the result of a fundamental *association* of the two terms in the natural child reader.

In a crucial scene, Ellen is dusting the Humphrey’s house and realizes that she does not have the “freedom” of the library. She appeals to John and is quickly granted the permission not only to clean but also to peruse its shelves. Yet, John’s scolding of Ellen’s choice to read periodicals and novels quickly reveals that this freedom is contingent upon her “choice” to only read books that glorify God. Once she has done this, she will be able to also “read” nature. As John says,

> A bunch of flowers seems to bring me very near the hand that made them. They are the work of his fingers; and I cannot consider them without being joyfully assured of the glory and loveliness of their creator. It is written as plainly to me in their delicate painting and sweet breath and curious structure, as in the very pages of the Bible, though no doubt without the Bible I could not read the flowers.⁴²⁷
By reading the Bible and nature, Ellen comes to submit herself fully to God and soon begins to challenge anyone who will keep her from this path. For instance, she consistently challenges her rich, non-devout aunt and uncle who repudiate her “extraordinary taste for freedom.” Yet, Ellen’s “freedom” as a reader is a freedom to choose submission—not to law or to material expectations of womanhood, but to the Bible and simple, natural living, which lead her to a lawful and “properly feminine” life.

A similar narrative of child readership appears in *The Lamplighter*, which Cummins originally wrote as a story to entertain her nieces. The main character, Gerty, is a passionate orphan who, like Ellen, must learn to control her temper and submit to the power of God. Also like Ellen, Gerty acts as a fierce critical voice against the luxuries of the rich and the injustices forced upon the poor. At one point in the text, she uses her view of “freedom” to challenge her rich guardian, Mr. Graham, in his attempts to make her into a lady: “[I]t would be tyranny in Mr. Graham to insist upon my remaining with them . . . It is cruel in Mr. Graham to try to deprive me of my free-will.” Yet, Gerty’s “free-will” refers to her desire to perform the self-sacrificing Christian duties that are taught by her blind friend, Emily. She learns these duties by reading to Emily one hour each day, benefiting from a “natural” inculcation of Christianity:

Indeed, it did not occur to Gerty that she went [to Emily] to be taught anything; but simply and gradually the blind girl imparted light to the child’s dark soul, and the truths that make for virtue, the lessons that are divine, were implanted in her so naturally . . . that she realized not the work that was going on; but long after. As a result of her reading, Gerty not only learns “history, biography, and books of travels . . . when most children’s literary pursuits are confined to stories and pictures,” but “the power of Christian humility,” which Emily believes will restrain Gerty’s “native
Though she retains some of her tempers that turn to a righteous anger at injustice, Gerty grows up to be the epitome of a Christian woman.

Even more popular than *The Lamplighter* or *The Wide, Wide World, Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) supplied the nineteenth century with its most lasting emblem of sentimentality: Little Eva. Eva offers a slightly different model of sentimental childhood than Ellen or Gerty, one that ultimately serves to distance ideal childhood from actual readers. She is surprisingly similar to Emerson’s and Hawthorne’s idealized images of “natural” childhood and enjoys astounding freedom for a child, but instead of growing into a submissive woman, she comes to enforce submission and moral reading in others. Like Emerson’s nonchalant little boy, she is characterized by her freedom from restraints, social or parental, frequently appearing as a ray of sunshine, a shadow, or a bird that has burst from its cage:

[As] no word of chiding or reproof fell on her ear for whatever she chose to do, she pursued her own way all over the boat. Always dressed in white, she seemed to move like a shadow . . . there was not a corner or nook, above or below, where those fairy footsteps had not glided.

The emphasis on Eva’s freedom is indicative of a larger preoccupation with freedom and imprisonment in the text, which, unlike most transcendentalist writing, centers on a rejection of *literal* slavery, as well as other kinds of metaphorical childishness. Similar to Warner’s Ellen, Eva’s status outside of the bonds of society often grants her a voice of critique.

While *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is less forthcoming about the American citizen’s childishness and resulting lack of freedom than the transcendentalist texts, Stowe is nonetheless intensely interested in questions of national freedom and education, taking as
her primary subject the thousands of African American slaves whose growth has been unnaturally stunted by slavery. The slaves are an expression of the problem of subjection within American “free” citizenship: while adults are supposed to become free after they have learned the law, the situation of slavery reveals that this is not the case. The law, instead, is revealed to be a constraining force:

Whoever visits some estates [in the South], and witnesses the good-humored indulgence of some masters and mistresses, and the affectionate loyalty of some slaves, might be tempted to dream the oft-fabled poetic legend of a patriarchal institution, and all that; but over and above the scene there broods a portentous shadow—the shadow of law. So long as the law considers all those human beings with beating hearts and living affections, only as so many things belonging to a master . . . So long it is impossible to make anything beautiful or desirable in the best regulated administration of slavery. 434

Stowe’s emphasis on the slaves’ “beating hearts and living affections” suggests that their subjection is all the more troubling because they possess the emotional capacities for affection that are supposed to ensure the citizen’s freedom. To further accentuate the slaves’ powerlessness, she resists the typical understanding of slaves as relatively free and “loved” children, suggesting instead that they are forced to remain as subjected children without the possibility of growing up. For instance, Marie calls her slaves “grown up children” as a way to dismiss their potential for freedom.

While chattel slavery is fundamentally different from citizenship in most respects, this imagery of subjected childhood links the condition of slavery to prevalent nineteenth-century concerns about the citizen’s childishness in general. Slavery, for Stowe, is an index of the problems facing American citizens as a whole; the fate of citizenship and the fate of the slaves are inextricably linked. It is no coincidence that Stowe zeroes in on the “oft-fabled” patriarchal notion that affection for one’s masters leads to freedom, as this
was also an underlying assumption in the command for citizens to “love the law.” Stowe illustrates the parallel by demonstrating the ways in which slave laws render white citizens powerless as well, calling into question the equation of lawfulness and freedom in American citizenship. For instance, Mrs. Shelby mourns her inability to save Tom, as well as her failed attempts to make slavery a free and moral institution: “I thought, by kindness, and care, and instruction, I could make the condition of [my slaves] better than freedom—fool that I was!” St. Clare likewise sees that slavery is corrupt, but he believes that the law prevents him from stopping it. For example, in the case of Prue, he argues that he could not have interfered because “there is no law” that allows it.

Stowe explicitly links St. Clare’s powerlessness to that of the slaves by highlighting his childishness. If Tom is an “adult child,” stunted by the limitations of American citizenship, St. Clare is perhaps even more so. Given the iconography of childish adults throughout nineteenth-century culture, it can be no coincidence that Ophelia often thinks of St. Clare as a “boy,” or that he has a fixation on his dead mother. St. Clare’s childishness is all the more tragic for the fact that he is an adult, one of the only characters in the text who has any potential for power or action. Yet St. Clare cannot exercise his so-called freedom, because his indoctrination into the notion of a free citizenship based on law has left him unable to see any different possibilities for action or self-reliance. While St. Clare realizes as Stowe does that the problem of subjection stems from the existing system of education, he cannot imagine an alternative system. In a conversation with his brother Alfred, St. Clare declares that the nation has reached a crisis in its instruction of children, which he believes is the “staple work of the human race.” Yet, St. Clare believes that the power of change falls only to the state:
“Education, to do anything, must be a state education.” St. Clare’s allegiance does not provide him the promised adulthood or freedom, but only the inability to imagine any powerful action outside of the law.

Stowe, conversely, seeks to remedy the citizen’s powerlessness by disassociating citizenship from an allegiance to the state and reestablishing it as a metaphysical union that rests upon the moral feelings of individuals. As Tompkins has argued, she does this, in part, by endowing those who are powerless (children and slaves) with emotional and moral righteousness. Little Eva plays a central role in establishing this alternative mode of citizenship, as a child who can read slavery rightly and teach others to also read through a moral lens. Both in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and in its many adaptations, Eva frequently appears as a “beautiful reader,” whose ability to read and to teach reading will bring freedom to others. Like Emerson’s child reader, she does not limit herself to dusty books. Though she primarily reads the Bible, she continually reinvents the text as a living part of the world in which she lives. The narrator remarks that, for Eva, Jesus “had ceased to be an image and a picture of the distant past, and come to be a living, all-surrounding reality.” Eva spontaneously uses biblical language to describe the intermingling of material and divine in her own experience. In one scene, she believes that she sees New Jerusalem in the clouds above the lake: “Look in those clouds!—they look like great gates of pearl; and you can see beyond them—far; far off—it’s all gold.” In another image, Eva speaks the Bible verse, “And I saw a sea of glass, mingled with fire,” as her own expression of the lake scene before her. As a result of her ability to read nature as embodying piety, she is able to re-imagine citizenship as stemming from a naturally evident, morally conscious relationship between all human
beings rather than from law alone. Eva imagines unifying citizens through their common abilities to read, much as Stowe does in her writing of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. For instance, she insists upon teaching her servant Mammy to read and fantasizes about building a boarding school in the north to “teach [the slaves] to read their own Bible.” She envisions that these initial reading lessons will eventually preclude the need for her moral influence: “It seems to me, Mamma, the Bible is for every one to read themselves. They need it a great many times when there is nobody to read it.” In passages such as this, Eva encourages the citizen’s natural morality through reading the Bible rather than through the abstract dictums of law.

Despite Stowe’s concern with the citizen’s lack of freedom, however, Eva’s deathbed speech, undoubtedly the most frequently reproduced scene of the book, emphasizes that sentimental citizenship requires its own kind of submission—specifically, the assimilation of citizens into one register of moral feeling and, indeed, moral reading. Before she dies, she lectures a group of slaves who have convened to mourn her passing:

Many of you, I am afraid, are very careless. You are thinking only about this world. I want you to remember that there is a beautiful world, where Jesus is . . . But if you want to go there, you must not lead idle, careless, thoughtless lives. You must be Christians.

Eva’s insistence that everyone must be Christian illustrates the homogeneity demanded by sentimental revisions of citizenship. The assimilation of each citizen’s feelings into a shared sentimental truth is integral to the project of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and to the logic of sentimental literature in general. In her concluding remarks, for example, Stowe equates all motherly feelings, and indeed all feelings about one’s fellow citizens, to create
one emotional imperative: “you who have learned, by the cradles of your own children to love and feel for all mankind . . . pity the mother who has all your affections, and not one legal right to protect, guide, or educate, the child of her bosom!” In this passage, the child becomes the ultimate unifying figure, with sympathy for one’s child prefiguring all sympathetic acts on the part of the adult citizen.

In the case of both Eva’s listeners and Stowe’s readers, submission to sentimental citizenship happens by way of the child and specifically through the reading encounter. Though Eva tells the slaves that Jesus will love them even if they are not able to read, she sees reading the Bible as an important way to align them into one mode of “right” and Christian feeling. Tom quickly takes up this project after Eva’s death by attempting to convince her father to read scripture, a task that St. Clare reluctantly accepts out of his love for Eva. Stowe relies on Eva (and other “innocent” and “natural” children) to provide an entrance point for adult citizens into the project of unified sympathetic citizenship, which the book attempts to carry out on a broader scale. Sánchez-Eppler argues that a similar logic underlies the cultural work of the temperance narrative; reformers imagined that alcoholics could be reclaimed by gaining their sympathies for their children and for the child characters of the tales, which children were also supposed to distribute. Books and children were the means through which sentimental citizenship would supposedly take hold, both demanding that the citizen submit to particular moral “truths” and behaviors.

Despite the frequent illustrations of Eva as challenging social norms, her early death ultimately casts her less as a participant in her imagined nation of united feelings than as a conduit through which others are able to relate, more like a book to be read than
the one who is reading it. This is true of many sentimental children, who remain outside of even their own constructions of citizenship. Glenn Hendler notes that children are frequently the agents of sympathy, but not the objects with whom the audience is supposed to identify. For instance, he notes that Jean Jacques Rousseau’s paradigmatic image of sentimentalism in *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*—a man watching a beast murder a child who has been ripped from the hands of its mother—does not ask viewers to “feel with” the infant but to consider the grief of the parent. Throughout *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, it is the audience’s ability to mourn for lost children that ensures their submission to the text’s sentimental message, for instance in the famous passage where Eliza asks Mrs. Bird if she has ever lost a child. Children’s ability to unite citizens is dependent upon their location at citizenship’s periphery, which is, in turn, enabled by a cultural fascination with their weakness and innocence. In addition to scenes in which children grow up and submit, the crowning scene of the sentimental narrative is the angelic child’s death, a motif that demonstrates the growing allure of the child’s innocence and delicateness, as well as a sort of poetic violence towards children who remain outside of social constraints. Eva’s death inspires a social agenda to protect children like her from the corruption that has made the world into a place where the natural child cannot live. Her legacy is a model of sentimental citizenship based on the child’s dependence and need for security. She is what Lauren Berlant would term “an icon of feminized infantile vulnerability,” demonstrating the ways in which the American system has failed its children.

Although the child’s “innocence” is a new construction, Eva’s death significantly reproduces the image of childhood with which I began this study: the pious Puritan child
who dies early. The repetition is not an accident; while the sentimental purports to
imagine a new system of moral feeling outside of the law, it is also profoundly backward-
looking to a time that authors assumed was more morally righteous and less corrupted by
self-interest and greed. The child, who seems to offer a new potential for America, in
many ways offers more of the same structures of subjection. As both the fragility and
recuperative power of the innocent child might suggest, sentimentalism’s challenges to
the law are often limited. Though St. Clare tells Tom that he will free him as a promise to
Eva, he does not legally free any of his slaves. Later, while a lock of Eva’s hair also
frightens Simon Legree into remembrance of his mother, the child is not able to stop him
from having Tom beaten to death. These scenes substantiate what Sánchez-Eppler has
observed in the temperance narratives: “the child’s ability to domesticate and even
feminize male desires does not fundamentally alter the structures of power.”

Even though Stowe proclaims that Eva’s fate “is the victory without the battle, the crown
without the conflict,” there is a disconnection between Eva’s ideal existence and the
actual clashes that freeing the slaves will entail.

The image of the sentimental child enforcing right reading is, in the end,
remarkably compatible with the very modes of submission that Stowe was protesting in
her denunciation of slavery. In a handful of the “anti-Tom” books that appeared in the
south as a way of protesting the novel, Eva’s championing of literacy is appropriated as a
means of supporting the slave system rather than undermining it. For instance, in an 1853
“anti-Tom” adaptation of the text, Aunt Mary’s Picture Book; Little Eva, Flower of the
South, Eva is depicted as a miniature schoolteacher who instructs the slaves to read by
writing letters on a blackboard. The fictitious familial narrator, Aunt Mary, remarks,
“Here you see, is little Eva teaching the little colored boys and girls the alphabet. See how pleased they are, for they all love Eva, and would do anything to please her.”

Despite Eva’s claim in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that everyone must read for themselves, Aunt Mary has Eva read *for* the slaves, reflecting the sentimental need for a unified reading, as well as the usefulness of this unification in promoting the affectionate veneer of slavery:

It is Sabbath morning, and Eva as usual, is reading the Bible to the colored people; she has learned some of them to read, but they would rather hear Eva read that read themselves, for they say her voice is so sweet; and she always explains all the questions they ask her so pleasantly.

The slaves’ desire to have Eva read for them translates to their desire for continued slavery. *Little Eva, The Flower of the South* replaces Tom with a slave named Sam. In this text, Sam gains his freedom as a result of saving Eva from the water, but he chooses not to take it: “he never left them, he loved them all too well.”

As the image of Eva teaching the slave children suggests, the “natural” child reader is often part of a larger strategy for disciplining not-so-natural children who perhaps more adequately resemble actual readers. As a child endangered by the slave system, Eva is a sanitized, white version of the other child character of the text, Topsy. A “bad” slave girl who has never learned to read, Topsy is generally considered the opposite of Eva. In fact, in the nineteenth century, a popular children’s toy was the “Topsy-Turvy” doll, which children could flip upside down to reveal Eva or Topsy respectively, making Topsy literally into Eva’s dark “other.” While the negative pairing seems to suggest that Topsy might be able to offer a different model of citizenship than Eva, the appeals staged on behalf of Eva and Topsy are fundamentally similar. As the combination of the two children into one doll implies, Eva’s and Topsy’s fates are
intertwined; the appeals staged in the name of Eva’s innocence encourage adults to find
refuge for “at risk” children like Topsy within the existing structures of educational
institutions. The double representation of the child reader collapses into a single
objective.

Topsy bears the burden of Eva’s sentimental lesson by becoming the target of
reform. As has become standard in later reforms based on “at risk” children, Topsy’s
endangered status is signified primarily through her illiteracy. While Topsy learns her
letters “as if by magic,” she is lacking the basic ability to read the world around her. For
example, she believes that the “state” in which man was first created might be Kentucky.
When asked the catechism question of who made her, she answers, echoing Hawthorne’s
Pearl, “I spect I grow’d. Don’t think nobody never made me.” Of course, Topsy has
been created by the slave system and thus becomes its poster child; as Ophelia points out
to St. Clare, “It is your system makes such children,” to which he replies, “I know it, but
they are made,—they exist,—and what is to be done with them?” As a product of
American subjugation not unlike the adult children in nineteenth-century periodicals,
Topsy has no sense of the true power or meaning of language. As St. Clare remarks,
“One word is as good as another to her.” Rather than providing an opportunity to
reinvent language and the reader’s relationship to it, Topsy’s status as endangered child
leads to strategies of assimilation and indoctrination. For example, St. Clare asserts that
with a child as illiterate as Topsy, the creative power of language needs to be curbed
rather than encouraged. When Topsy mistakes the state of grace for the state of
Kentucky, he tells Ophelia, “You’ll have to give her a meaning or she’ll make one.”
Perhaps predictably, Stowe’s actual suggestions for the literacy education of slaves triumph in the very popular modes of education that Emerson and Thoreau critique, such as the spelling book:

[the emancipated slaves] cried for the spelling-book as for bread, and pleaded for teachers as a necessary of life . . . Long before the war closed there were teachers and schools in our camps and in all the region where our armies protected the settlements of fugitive slaves.  

The aim of these endeavors, Stowe argues, is to “bring into an orderly and edifying use some of the peculiarities of the colored race.” Thus, while spelling-book literacy no doubt proved empowering for newly freed black slaves, it came at a cost, as it relied on the perpetuation of institutionalized forms of literacy. Topsy’s eventual assimilation into a sentimental Christian model ultimately signifies not only her own indoctrination, but also reflects predominant nineteenth-century efforts, such as the Sunday school, which provided literacy instruction to underprivileged children in exchange for Christian allegiance. As Sarah Robbins has persuasively claimed, Ophelia’s education of Topsy exemplifies a larger trend toward charity-based, woman-led literacy initiatives. In these initiatives, literacy frequently becomes a means of culling ignorance, bad behavior, and lack of social usefulness, in addition to nominally promoting the child reader’s freedom.

Another 1853 children’s version of Stowe’s text, Uncle Tom’s Picture-Book, includes a poem about Topsy that draws explicit connections between the child’s lack of literacy and her propensity for stealing: “Now it is wrong, as every reader knows, / To rummage people’s drawers, and wear their clothes; / But Topsy is a negro child, you see, / Who never learned to read like you and me.” Despite the “otherness” suggested by
Topsy’s designation as illiterate “negro child,” the poem appears in a pedagogical text meant to teach (white) children to read. It goes on to compare Topsy’s misbehavior to that of common schoolchildren who cheat in school: “The copy by some clever school-mate penned, / The witty saying picked up from a friend, / Makes many a miss and master look as fine, / As if they coined the words or penned the line.” The comparison suggests that the solution to the crisis in American education and citizenship is, for Topsy as for the actual child reader, careful correction and assimilation, rather than greater freedom from educational constraints. Thus, while Eva remains childhood’s image, it is really Topsy who provides its reflection.

With the turn to the sentimental child, the infantile citizen thus gained even stronger footing as a central figure in American political and literary culture, though an always fluid one. By the nineteenth century, children’s readership had undergone a significant shift from the image of the closet child reader, but one that, in its replication of the Puritan deathbed narrative, also signaled a strange circularity in the meanings and uses of child readership—as well as an American inability (or refusal) to fully resist the allure of an unending childhood. The sentimental child’s ability to regulate citizenship from the outside anticipated the appeals for protection that have characterized children’s relationship with the political and, indeed, with literary texts well into the twenty-first century. Though the child has remained a generative figure for reconsidering citizenship, sentimental childhood in particular continues to be significant to modern appeals. As Berlant has argued, infantile citizenship in the present-day era relies largely on children’s supposed innocence and location outside of citizenship, where they act as its privileged
readers. Yet, as I have demonstrated with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, these sentimental *images* of children often rely on the designation of *actual* child readers as in dire need of constraints upon their reading practices, feelings, and acts. While in the popular imagination children frequently signify the pure and righteous reading of Eva, children’s readership has remained, as Topsy’s, something that cannot be guaranteed, something that is always at risk. Indeed, appeals based on children’s illiteracy have unfailingly been the cause for fears about the end of childhood, citizenship, and readership as we know it.
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INTRODUCTION

1 Samuel Goodrich, The Tales of Peter Parley About America (Philadelphia: Thomas, Cowpertwait, and Co.: 1845), iii.

2 Ibid.: 131.


7 See Anne Scott MacLeod, American Childhood: Essays on Children’s Literature of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994) and Gillian Avery, American Children and Their Books (New York: New York University Press, 2000).


11 Quoted in Nina Baym, Novels, Readers, and Reviewers’ Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 49.


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21 Sprague writes, “On the 19th of April, 1783, just eight years after the battle of Lexington, the commanding general of the American forces sent the joyful news of peace to his long-suffering army. On the third day of the same month, in the city of New York, the youngest of the eleven children of William and Sarah Irving was born. To the child was given the Christian name of Washington . . . Born with the new Republic, and through the whole of his life an ardent lover of his country, it seems no stretch of the imagination to conceive that Irving was inspired from the beginning with the high resolve to add something to its glory.”

22 Sprague continues, “James Fenimore Cooper was six years younger than Irving, and his first novels appeared in 1821. Longfellow and Hawthorne were in college when Irving was famous . . . Ralph Waldo Emerson was born the year after Irving began to write for *The Morning Chronicle*; Oliver Wendell Holmes, the year of the publication of Irving’s *History of New York*; and James Russell Lowell, the year *The Sketch-Book* was published.”


26 Ibid.: 76.

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28 Ibid.: 1387.


30 Debates about infant baptism added to the larger dispute about children’s spiritual responsibility. Some sects opposed infant baptism because they felt it threatened the idea of individual moral responsibility by placing the child’s salvation in the hands of the parents. The New England Puritans were not in complete agreement on the subject, but most accepted infant baptism with the caution that it was not a guarantee of salvation. Rather, it was a covenant that must be later affirmed by the child. The Halfway Covenant of
1662, for example, allowed children to be baptized with the stipulation that they would later uphold their commitment to the church.


34 There is some evidence that literacy in seventeenth-century America was fairly high among younger people as a result of these laws. Kenneth Lockridge estimates that about half of men and one-quarter of women could read in the mid-seventeenth century, while other scholars have argued that Lockridge’s figures are low because he relies on signatures from wills to determine literacy. E. Jennifer Monaghan argues that signatures do not provide a full picture of literacy in America because people were generally taught to read before they were taught to write. Most children learned to read in the home, and some went to village “dame schools,” where women taught reading and the catechism to children aged 2-5. Women usually did not go on to learn writing, as it was not required to read and understand the Bible, which was the goal of most literacy training. Monaghan notes that while reading was often taught by women, writing was considered a craft and was largely a male domain. Reading textbooks were available in most households, but writing texts were costly and usually only owned by writing masters. Based on this evidence, Monaghan argues that signatures only help to establish an absolute minimum number of literate persons. She notes that in 1668, officials in Beverly, Massachusetts said they could not find any child over age nine who could not read.


38 American printers were forbidden to print Bibles by law, so orders for children’s books, such as catechisms and primers, would have been a crucial part of overall revenue in the colonies. The wide circulation of books for children suggests that they provided booksellers with a steady source of income in an otherwise risky business, and, in fact, made it possible for printing and bookselling to thrive. According to Hugh Amory, when Boston bookseller Michael Perry died in 1700, schoolbooks constituted one-fifth of his total stock, about 1,200 copies. Such large figures suggest that the profits from children’s books probably even helped to fund orders for less popular books.

39 Even given his substantial evidence for the popularity of books for children, Hall admits that he may underestimate ownership of certain types of books, such as those written for children, because he relies on largely on probate inventories. Cheaper, unbound books, such almanacs, schoolbooks, and catechisms, may not have been considered valuable enough to be listed. Thus, the circulation of these books may be even larger than indicated in the inventories. Additionally, as probate inventories were conducted after the owner had died, books owned as a child were often long gone or destroyed.

40 Amory, “Reinventing the Colonial Book,” 54.


49 Green, *The Christian’s ABC*.


51 In his history of the primer, Ford includes the rhyming alphabet from a 1762 version of the primer that substitutes all of the previously secular rhymes with Bible characters.


55 A notable exception is John Paget’s *A Primer of Christian Religion, or a Form of Catechizing Discourse from the Beholding of God’s Work in the Creation of the World.* (1601), which does actually ask for open-ended answers.

56 These narratives may have been inspired by catechism-like texts designed to teach people how to die. Andrew Taylor, in “Into His Secret Chamber,” mentions a medieval treatise called *The Book of the Craft of Dying*, which included dialogues or “interrogations” to lead the dying person to affirm his or her faith. By providing clergy and loved ones, as well as the dying person, with appropriate questions and answers, this book teaches the reader to be, as Taylor says, “stage manager of a pious death.”

57 Mather, *Cares about the Nurseries*, 25.


60 Mather, *The Religion of the Closet* (Boston: Printed by T. Green, 1705), 41.

61 Mather, *Cares about the Nurseries*, 45.

63 Ibid.: 43.

64 Mather, *Cares about the Nurseries*, 71-72.

65 Ibid.: 35.

66 Ibid.: 41.

67 Ibid.: 12-16.


69 Mather, *The Religion of the Closet*.

70 Thomas Brooks, in *The Privie Key to Heaven* (London: Printed for John Hancock, 1665) traces the meaning of the “closet” to the Greeks, who used it to signify a room or cabinet.


72 In *The Making of the Modern Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), Dror Wahrman has claimed that the modern self is defined as “a very particular understanding of personal identity, one that presupposes an essential core of selfhood characterized by psychological depth, or interiority, which is the bedrock of unique, expressive individual identity.”

73 Indeed, the closet’s unique ability to both protect and promote an individual’s private behavior and subject it to public control is well known by the current gay and lesbian community, even though the latter usage has not often been linked to the seventeenth-century definition of the term.

74 Cotton Mather, *The Young Man Spoken To* (Boston: Printed by T. Green for Samuel Gerrish), 42.

75 Mather, *The Religion of the Closet*, 34.


77 Jagodzinski, *Privacy and Print*, 50.

78 Jean-Francois Gilmont. “Protestant Reformation and Reading.” *A History of Reading in the West*. Ed. Guguelmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier. p. 236

79 Sir William Dawes’s *The Duties of the Closet, Being an Earnest Exhortation to Closet Devotion* (London: Thomas Speed, 1695) is written specifically for “labouring people.”

80 Mather, *The Young Man Spoken To*, 9.


84 *Early Piety, Exemplified in Elizabeth Butcher of Boston, who was born July 14th 1709 and died July 13th 1718. Being Just Eight Years and Eleven Months Old* (Boston: Printed by S. Kneeland, for Samuel Gerrish, 1725), 2. Interestingly, by the eighteenth century, reading in bed was considered a particularly slovenly practice, as Jacqueline Pearson documents in *Women’s Reading in Britain 1750-1835*.

85 Ibid.: 3.


90 Mather, *The Young Man Spoken To*, 9.

91 Mather, *The Diary of Cotton Mather for the Year 1712*, xix.


96 Rede, *A Token for Youth*, 11.


98 The boy’s agency is limited by the fact that his passages come from the Bible, the most frequently recommended reading material for children. Elsewhere, White suggests that he would not be so quick to approve of just any type of children’s reading material, warning children not to read “Ballads and foolish books.”

99 White, *A Little Book for Little Children*, 76.

100 Janeway and Mather, *A Token for Children*, 77.


103 Accordingly, Jagodzinski notes that the way children read books changes from the early seventeenth century to the latter half: “While one [earlier] group of converts reads sacred books in order to coax the self into submission to the divine will, the other group of readers finds books to help them escape the authority not only of a ‘false’ religion, but of home and parent.”

104 Such arguments prefigured the motifs of parental tyranny that Fliegelman argues were in place by the mid-eighteenth century, and which accompanied the American Revolution.

105 *Early Piety, Exemplified in Elizabeth Butcher of Boston*, 15.

106 Rede, *A Token for Youth*, 3.


109 Most famously, in *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), Lawrence Stone has argued that as people are increasingly seen as private individuals, family relationships become characterized by freedom, personal agency, and equal exchange rather than by dominance, cruelty, and control. As evidence for his theory, which he terms “affective individualism,” Stone uses English building plans that divide the house into personal and private spaces (in other words, into closets): “Private rooms, like ‘the study,’ ‘my lord’s chamber,’ ‘my lady’s chamber,’ were built for individual seclusion . . . house plans allocated space to corridors, which now allowed access without intruding upon privacy.”


111 In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Allen Lane, 1977), Foucault calls the execution “a theatre of hell.”


115 Mather, *The Diary of Cotton Mather*, 33.


Fear, of course, had long been understood as an effective way to govern children. As Adam Fox documents in *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500-1700* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), parents frequently scared children with stories of “hobgoblins, Raw-heads and bloody-bones, buggybows, Tom-pokers, bull-beggars and such horrible bodies.” While the Puritans discouraged talk of mythical creatures like these, it is likely that they inherited the tone of their children’s stories from secular oral culture as well as from the Bible’s cautionary tales. The trend of using fear as a child governing strategy was beginning to fall out of favor by the end of the seventeenth century, partially because of its effects, but also because of its roots in peasant culture.


Mather often encourages his children to use their physical maladies to imagine the condition of their spirit. For example, in his diary, he writes, “Some of my Children, Two of them, have Scorbutic Maladies and languishments upon them; a third of them is troubled with Bleeding at the Nose. I would Immediately apply myself to their cure; But at the same time, I would improve their Circumstances, to awaken their preparations for Death; and I would Mind them of Analogous Distempers in their Souls of which they must pray to their great Savior, that they may be cured.”

White, *A Little Book for Little Children*, 89.


Ibid.: Preface.


This image recalls Foucault’s discussion of panopticonism in *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault explains that the panopticon’s power lies in its ability to make the criminal visible at any point in time: “the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so.” In other words, the criminal knows that he could be being watched at any given time, so he must constantly act as if he is.

Foucault observes that the panopticon functions because “A real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation. So it is not necessary to use force to constrain the convict to good behaviour.” The perfect disciplinary apparatus, he says, would “make it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly . . . a perfect eye that nothing would escape.” For the Puritans, the eye of God certainly fits such a description. As these passages from Puritan texts suggest, the seeds of the panopticon were present long before Jeremy Bentham invented the structure in the eighteenth century; the panopticon is an external manifestation of what is, in the closet, merely imagined.


Ibid.: 78.

Several child death narratives were written by the dead children’s parents, including *A Token for Youth* and *The Compleat Scholler*.

Mather, *The Diary of Cotton Mather*.

Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, 113.


Brooks, *The Privie Key to Heaven*, 100.


Foucault emphasizes that the cells of the panopticon resemble tiny theatrical stages: “All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are, like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible.”


Mather, *The Young Man Spoken To*, 39. In its close attention to performance and conduct, the discourse surrounding the closet begins to resemble another mechanism of social control that would become popular in the eighteenth century: the conduct book. Conduct books were often aligned with children’s books in precisely delineating what children’s reading practices should be.


Ibid.: 11.

Ibid.: Preface.

CHAPTER 2


156 For ways in which the early American government rejected an equation of the citizen and child, see Holly Brewer’s *By Birth or Consent: Children, Law, and the Anglo-American Revolution in Authority* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). Brewer provides historical evidence that governmental reforms following the American Revolution deliberately excluded children from activities of citizenship that they had previously exercised, such as voting and holding office. In addition, because liberal theory emphasized rationality that children do not often have, children’s signed approval carried more weight on legal documents before the influence of theorists such as Locke.


158 Ibid.: 325.

159 Ibid.: 325.

160 Ibid.: 326.

161 Ibid.: 322.

162 Ibid.: 371.


166 Ibid.: 109-110.

167 Ibid.: 209.


Susan Uselmann, “Women Reading and Reading Women: Early Scribal Notions of Literacy in the Ancrene Wisse.” *Exemplaria: A Journal of Theory in Medieval and Renaissance Studies*. 16.2 (2004): 369; Uselmann notes that the idea that emotional reading does not require high literacy was common in the thirteenth century and has often been considered a truism.


Ibid.: 65.

Holbrook Jackson, *The Anatomy of Bibliomania* (New York: Charles Scriber’s Sons, 1934), 188.

The *Renowned History of Giles Gingerbread* (Worchester: Isaiah Thomas, 1786), 17.

Ibid.: 20.

Ibid.: 30.

Ibid.: 31.

Ibid.: 27.


Some examples of affectionate, parental “governors” from popular children’s books of the time include John Newbery’s Nurse Truelove and Little Goody Two Shoes; Fordyce’s “brotherly friend” in his sermons; Maria Edgeworth’s Good Aunt and Good French Governess, and countless fictional writers of collections of letters to young people.

Locke himself makes the case for women’s domestic authority in *Two Treatises* by pointing out that the fifth commandment, which had traditionally been read only to apply to fathers, also affords power to mothers.


Locke, Two Treatises on Government, 296.

See Crain, The Story of A, for an account of the ways in which children’s alphabet rhymes linked elementary literacy with a more embodied oral culture to support the state’s efforts at establishing order.


Ibid.: xiii.

Ibid.: xiii.

This posture towards readers in texts may actually indicate an expansion and diversification of readership. As Patrick Brantlinger points out in The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), the appeals to “dear reader” in the eighteenth and nineteenth novels are likely an attempt to reduce “the mass reading public to manageable size, providing the illusion, at least, of individual proximity and cooperation.”

Eighteenth-century educators were explicitly concerned with even minute details of the reading experience, such as pronunciation, so that individual readers would be able to represent a united nation of readers and citizens. This effort can be seen most readily in the eighteenth-century attempt to standardize American pronunciation in reading, casting readers not primarily as individuals, but as citizens who embody unified consent to citizenship through their univocal reading. In its eleventh edition by the time The Governess was first printed in the United States, Webster’s The American Spelling Book claimed that pronunciation was an important element of reading instruction that had been too long neglected, spurring a trend in reading primers of separating words by sounds in addition to number of syllables. This addition of sound to the reading primer had a political aim; a letter advertising Webster’s book claims that it “will go very far towards demolishing all the odious distinctions occasioned by provincial dialects.” For a unified and “free” American nation to exist, American readers must consent to textual authority by reading in “one voice.” Webster represents his concern with pronunciation as a proper understanding of the “powers” of the alphabet, which he claims have been ignored in earlier primers. By “powers,” Webster means the sounds that the letters make, but he seems to also have another meaning in mind: the powers of the alphabet to create a nation of American citizen-readers, whose reading (aloud) is staged as a personification of consenting citizenship.

Notably, the “Barbarico and Benefico” portion of The Governess was the first to interest an American printer, perhaps because its direct contrast between “free” and corrupt governance spoke to growing concerns about America’s own colonial government. It appeared as its own tale in Boston in 1768.


Ibid.: 63.

Ibid.: 66.

Ibid.: 74.

Ibid.: 79.

Ibid.: 117.
Sybella’s formulation of affectionate governance highlights its restriction of the child’s and citizen’s desires, anticipating modern-day critiques of liberal democracy. Carole Pateman, in *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), has argued that the idea of contractual governance ignores the idea that no equal exchange can exist between a master and a subordinate. She writes, “The peculiarity of this exchange is that one party to the contract, who provides protection, has the right to determine how the other party will act to fulfill their side of the exchange.” She notes that we can determine the nature of contractual exchange by scrutinizing the economic contract, which contract theorists present as their ideal. In this contract, she argues, workers essentially become subordinate to the prerogatives of their employers. Like workers, she argues, children, wives, and citizens contract to perpetual obedience, which cannot be easily renegotiated.

Fielding, *The Governess*, 244-245.

For example, Jennifer Desiderio’s dissertation, “To Collect, Digest, and Arrange”: Authorship in the Early American Republic, 1792-1801 (Unpublished PhD Diss., The Ohio State University, 2004) argues that Foster instructs her child readers to become monitorial authors.


Ibid.: 11.

Ibid.: 11.


Foster, *The Boarding School*, 125.

Ibid.: 179.

CHAPTER 3


Susanna Rowson, *Mentoria; Or the Young Lady’s Friend* (Philadelphia: Printed for Robert Campbell, by Samuel Harrison Smith, 1794), 90.

Rowson, *Mentoria*, 49.

Rousseau’s scandalous novels, for instance, were not often printed in the U.S., and American readers had much less chance than British ones of encountering dirty French novels in book stalls.


A subscription list printed in Samuel Relf’s novel, *Infidelity, Or the Victims of Sentiment*, only lists the names of twenty-one unmarried women, including one known only as “a young lady,” out of a total of one hundred and forty-six subscribers. Even considering that some of the male and married female subscribers may have been ordering the books for younger readers (one subscriber is listed as the principal of a young ladies’ academy), this evidence suggests that novels such as *Infidelity* attracted readers of all ages.

This effort to associate the novel with female readers rather than children is often part of a larger task of recovering women’s literature of the period. In *Sensational Designs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), Jane Tompkins argues that women’s novels have been devalued because of their child readership and suggests that critics “rescue” them from this status.

For examples of the ways in which children’s citizenship grants rights to those who cannot exercise them over those who can, see Lauren Berlant’s work on fetal citizenship in *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

Paine did not mean to incite rebellion in actual children, even though his metaphor led to fears about children. When Paine’s argument is examined in his entirety, in fact, we see that, in his objections to hereditary government, he explicitly condemns the idea that children could have any part in political participation or rule: “Another evil which attends hereditary succession is, that the throne is subject to be possessed by a minor at any age.” Thus, when it comes to the actual potential for children’s exercise of power, Paine does not attribute to them the same prerogative as he does their metaphorical counterparts. The conclusion of Fielding’s story of the Princess Hebe demonstrates children’s literature’s engagement with this objection to child rule. While Hebe is returned to the throne at the end of the story, it is only after she has achieved “adult” citizenship status by learning the values of subjection. The only real children referenced in Paine’s text are those that have yet to be born, a population whose appeal to rights has typically had a powerful affective appeal in America, but whose ability to exercise consent or dissent is even more non-existent than that of living children.

While rights were not often applied to actual children in the Revolutionary era, the metaphor gave rise to the idea, if not the implementation, of child emancipation, a connection suggested by child rights advocates who still evoke liberal theory and revolutionary language as the origins of their cause.


History gives some isolated cases in which post-war anxieties about children stemmed from real-life acts of child disobedience during and after the American Revolution. As Steven Mintz observes in *Huck’s Raft: A History of Childhood* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), some children challenged their parents’ control by running away or forging papers to join the American army, creating a wave of fear regarding children’s passions and desires. In *Seduced, Abandoned, and Reborn: Visions of Youth in Middle-Class America, 1780-1850* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), Rodney Hessinger also cites student rebellions of the late eighteenth-century as evidence that youth in America were becoming increasingly bold, to the worry of their elders.


Royall Tyler, *The Algerine Captive; Or, the Life and Adventures of Doctor Updike Underhill, Six Years a Prisoner Among the Algerines* (London: Printed for G. and J. Robinson, 1802), 47.


A prime example of the bad reader narrative is Maria Edgeworth’s “Angelina,” in which an bad reader named Anne Warwick changes her name and runs away from home to live with a novelist who calls herself Araminta. In addition to writing romantic novels, Araminta fulfills More’s fears that the language of social reform will be applied to children, as a reprinted letter from her correspondence with Anne/Angelina demonstrates:

> With what emphatic energy of inborn independence does [my Angelina] exclaim against the family phalanx of her aristocratic persecutors! . . . The words ward and guardian appall my Angelina! But what are legal technical formalities against the view of shackle-scoring Reason?
Angelina’s relationship with Araminta leads her to rebel against her guardians and, indeed, seems to occasion all manner of lawlessness, as a sub-plot involving her servant and a stolen reel of lace indicates. Finally, Angelina realizes that Araminta is none other than an ugly, poor woman who smells of brandy and holds dangerous ideas about everything from sexual relations to social reform. She returns to her guardian, who gives her another book, Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote*, demonstrating that some fictional books put a stop to bad readership instead of encouraging it.

255 Gillian Brown, *The Consent of the Governed: The Lockean Legacy in Early American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001); In *Prodigals and Pilgrims: the American Revolution Against Patriarchal Culture, 1750-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), Jay Fliegelman points out that American versions of *Robinson Crusoe* particularly extol Crusoe for running away from his parents, while versions of *Clarissa* mourn the fact that Richardson’s heroine is not able to attain self-determination. Taking a cue from Fliegelman, Brown considers another transatlantic hero of children’s literature: Tom Thumb. She argues that Tom Thumb is essentially a rebellious child, who “supplies a legendary realization of the capacities with which Locke endowed children.” According to Brown, Thumb is the perfect icon of a culture that increasingly values the liberty of children: “the appeal of this tiny hero . . . depends upon as it converges with the sense of empowerment increasingly afforded children” (85).

256 Ibid.: 163, 175.

257 Ibid.: 175.

258 Ibid.: 178.


260 Ibid.: 8.

261 Barbara Arneil, “Becoming Vs. Being: A Critical Analysis of the Child in Liberal Theory,” *The Moral and Political Status of Children*, ed. David Archard and Colin M. Macleod. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Arneil probably gives the child even more leverage than the eighteenth-century child would have had. After all, she is writing from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, where child rights have become an established part of the legal debate, though still rather controversial even today. Eighteenth-century children would not have even had the concept of what a legal exercise of children’s rights might look like.

262 Brown is aware that the child’s consent or dissent to governance is ultimately fictional. However, she argues that it is an empowering fiction all the same, with material consequences. I, on the other hand, question the actual consequences of these fictions.


265 Indeed, Rosina follows a similar path as another rebellious child, Benjamin Franklin, a figure who became an icon of American self-sufficiency, and who perhaps manages to escape punishment by virtue of his love for the right kind of books.

266 Sansay, *Laura*, 44.

267 Ibid.: 45.

269 Ibid.: 93

270 Ibid.: 93-94; These ways of understanding texts are not strange or deviant in early America but are intrinsic to the process of training readers to be loving citizens. This seems to be tacitly suggested by the ease of which multiple characters can speak Dorcasina’s “language of love.” Both O’Connor and Philander are able to write letters that play to Dorcasina’s understanding of how texts work as representations of absent lovers. Even Harriot Stanly, who has supposedly been “protected” from novels and only shown “reasonable” texts, is able to mimic Dorcasina’s way of speaking when she poses as captain Montague. These characters’ ability to write as affectionate tutors, capturing their love in abstract language, shows the pervasiveness of the citizenship training that I discussed in chapter two.

271 Ibid.: 82.

272 Ibid.: 85.

273 As Davidson points out in her introduction to *Female Quixotism*, it is significant that the “bad” authority figures are often of another nationality; Dorcasina’s love for Irish, French and English writers and suitors is the worst fear of the Lacadamonians come true. The bad child reader often loves not only the wrong authority figures but the wrong nations.


275 Tenney, *Female Quixotism*, 78.

276 Ibid.: 316.

277 Ibid.: 316.

278 Ibid.: 57.

279 Ibid.: 77.

280 Ibid.: 281.


282 Tenney, *Female Quixotism*, 104.

283 Ibid.: 297.


285 Tenney, *Female Quixotism*, 3.

286 Ibid.: 3.
This particular image found its way to child readers via a new technology called the lantern slide. Lantern slides accompanied what were called magic lanterns, which were precursors to the slide projector, but using oil lamps. In the nineteenth century, they were sold as toys and also used in Sunday schools. They didn’t actually fall out of favor until the motion picture was invented, so Darley’s illustration could be considered the first Sleepy Hollow cartoon.


Mary Wollstonecraft, Thoughts on the Education of Daughters (London: Printed for J. Johnson, 1787), 3.


Terrence Martin, “Rip, Ichabod and the American Imagination.” Washington Irving: The Critical Reaction, ed. James W. Tuttleton. (New York: AMS Press, 1993), 59; Terrence Martin argues that Ichabod is marked as childlike due to his propensity to swallow anything, but that “growing up involves learning what not to swallow, in every sense of the word.”


Ibid.: 208.

Ibid., The Sketch Book, 53.

Ibid.: 383.

Ibid.: 384.


Homer B. Sprague, Ed. Six Selections from Irving’s Sketch-Book, with Notes, Questions, Etc. for Home and School Use (Boston: Ginn and Co. Publishers), 1898.

Ibid.: iii.

Ibid.: 165.

Amanda B. Harris, American Authors for Young Folks (Boston: Lothrop Publishing Company:1887).

Ibid.: 11-12.

Ibid.: 18.

Ibid.: 280.

Harris, *American Authors for Young Folks*, 24.


**CHAPTER 4**


In *American Literature and the Construction of Childhood* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998), Gail Schmunk Murray notes, “Publishers found quite an expanded family market in Victorian America. Books written especially for children became profitable . . . Thus the line that separated adult and child fiction in the mid- to late nineteenth century became blurred . . . *Pilgrim’s Progress, Tom Sawyer, Little Lord Fauntleroy, Little Women, Robinson Crusoe*, and *Wide, Wide World* were known to child and adult audiences alike and were passed on to second and third generations of readers in the same family.”


Qt. in Ibid: 2.


The “other children” in need of discipline by the natural child were, of course, those children and purportedly “childlike” adults who became particularly visible in the nineteenth century—slaves, workers, heathens, and the poor. The metaphor of childhood as it came to refer to these “children” was also undergoing a process of naturalization. While youth was formerly a stage of subjection that all humans could equally transcend (or not), nineteenth-century theories of patriarchalism and natural science argued that some categories of humans were evolutionally “stuck” in childhood. Thus, while Lauren Berlant has argued convincingly that the contemporary appeal of the innocent or natural child is her blankness of all identity categories, the notion of “children of nature” has historically been an imposed identity marker that has been used to justify oppression.

Joseph Baim takes the first view in “The Vision of the Child and the Romantic Dilemma: A Note on the Child Motif in Emerson” (Thoth: Syracuse University Graduate Studies in English. 7 (1966): 24), arguing that the child is Emerson’s most vivid symbol of the transcendental ideal: “Because he has no sense of the past or future, the child, unlike the time-bound unrealized adult, participates fully in each part of the cosmos . . . it is the child who finds his harmony in the power of the ‘over soul’: it is the child, then, who sees ‘the miraculous in the common.’” Conversely, Morton L. Ross argues in “Emerson’s Unenlightened Child: Some Corrective Notes.” (American Transcendental Quarterly. 2:2 (1998): 89) that the child necessarily resides in an unenlightened state that can only be alleviated by education. He claims that “the activity of transforming childish modes of perception into more complex and sophisticated ones defines [Emerson’s] most basic pedagogical concern.” In particular, he argues, the child is in need of culture, “which is largely responsible for emancipating the child from the despotism of the senses, for enlightening Emerson’s unenlightened child.”

Joseph Dennie, Joseph. “Shall I Liken This Generation? It is Like Unto Children.” The Port-Folio. 7 (1801): 355.

Ibid.: 355.

Ibid.: 355.

Ibid.: 355.

Ibid.: 355; While this image refers to France, Dennie is making a comparison between the “levity” of the French and of Americans.


Ibid.: 193.


Ibid.: 2296.


266
342 Melville, “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” 2300.


345 Ibid.: 1864.


347 Thoreau, Walden, 1863.

348 Ibid.: 1863.

349 Ibid.: 1864.


351 Ibid.: 223.


356 Thoreau, Walden, 1810.

357 For a detailed account of the transcendentalists’ involvement in the antislavery movement, see Sandra Harbert Petrulionis, To Set This World Right: The Antislavery Movement in Thoreau’s Concord (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006). For a broader take on children’s role in abolition, see Deborah C. De Rosa, Domestic Abolitionism and Juvenile Literature, 1830-1865 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).


359 Ibid.: 1116.

360 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Politics,” 213.

361 Noah Webster, The American Spelling Book (Philadelphia: Jacob Johnson, 1805).

363 For instance, Daniel Adams, author of *The Understanding Reader* (Leominster, Mass.: Printed by Salmon Wilder, 1805), complained in that spelling books were inadequate to teach children to read: “No person can become a correct speller by the spelling book alone, even should he commit to memory the whole contents of its pages.” As a result of the overuse of the spelling book, Adams claims, children were becoming educated without understanding. As a metaphor for American child readers, Adams referenced a popular carnival act of the time period, the Learned Pig:

> There is, in my opinion, as much difference between a Learned Reader and an Understanding Reader, as there is between a Learned Pig, which tells you the exact hour and minute of the day, and Pope Gregory XIII, who ascertained the exact number of hours and minutes in a solar year. The Pig knows nothing of time, nor of those measures . . . by which we reckon its progression; as little do many of our school boys, who pass for good readers, know or understand of those subjects, which they read.

In “Education No. III” (*Christian Monitor*. 2:2 (1817): 1) another writer also compares children in America to “the learned pig,” expressing a particular concern about the meaninglessness of literacy instruction: “We have even heard of patent machines to instruct boys in the elements of English!” The unspoken anxiety underneath these concerns was that, like the pig who was trained to spell words without really being able to read them and the child who could pronounce words without understanding them, American citizens could be made subject to textual authority without the ability to understand or act as free participants in either the literary public sphere or in their own government. After all, as many critics recognized, the pig’s success at “reading” the letters and numbers was dependent not on its own education or intelligence, but on its master’s ability to exercise control. Child readership had become an epidemic in America that was inseparable from concerns that citizens were lacking true autonomy and understanding.


366 Melville, “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” 2293; Cherry is a fiction that Melville created for “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” as historical evidence suggests that Melville’s aunt Mary Melvill, certainly no young mountain girl, gave him the book. The invention of Cherry suggests that, despite their critique of the childishness of American readers, nineteenth-century authors such as Melville saw the need to imagine a different kind of child reader to oppose the rote readers that had found their way into nineteenth-century popular consciousness.

367 Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 1161.

368 Ibid.: 1161.

369 Ibid.: 1161.

370 Emerson, *Emerson in His Journals*, 297.

371 Ibid.: 211.


Emerson, “Nature,” 1118.


Emerson, “Nature,” 1116.

Ibid.: 1108.

Ibid.: 1114.

Emerson, “Politics,” 219.

Ibid.: 219.


Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 1169; See Elizabeth Hewitt’s *Correspondence and American Literature, 1770-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) for a further discussion of Emerson’s political model in “Friendship” and “Love.”.

Hewitt, *Correspondence and American Literature*, 63.


Ibid.: 22.

Ibid.: 23.


Sánchez-Eppler, “Hawthorne and the Writing of Childhood,” 143; Hawthorne’s often cited attitudes about writing for children reflect the double conception of the child reader in nineteenth-century popular culture. On the one hand, he complains about having to write a child audience and claims that he has only endured such “drudgery” for the money. On the other, his stories, as well as his writings about his own children, often cast children in romantic terms as innocent and powerful figures, whose readings of the world are the only true ones.

Quoted in Elizabeth Hewitt, *Correspondence and American Literature*, 95.


Ibid.: 3.

Ibid.: 141.

Ibid.: 47.

See, for example, Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s *The Poor Rich Man and the Rich Poor Man* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1837), in which the “poor” rich man values the book he has won from a Sunday school only for its exchange potential, while the “rich” poor man values books for their inherent aesthetic and moral worth.


Ibid.: 53.

Sánchez-Eppler, “Hawthorne and the Writing of Childhood,” 143.


Ibid.: 67.

Ibid.: 79.

Ibid.: 79.

Ibid.: 39.


Ibid.: 76.

Ibid.: 75-76.

Ibid.: 124.


Hawthorne, *Grandfather’s Chair*, 186.


In her introduction to *The Lamplighter*, Baym notes that *The Wide, Wide World* “established the category of the best seller as we know it today, and thus revolutionized the publishing industry. It went through fourteen printings in two years.”

Susan Warner, *The Wide, Wide World* (New York: G.P. Putnam and Company, 1852); See, for instance, the discussion on p. 140 between John and Ellen about the pure pleasures of the moon that are lost to rich people who “make and trade of pleasure.”


Ibid.: 269.


Ibid.: 70, 73.

Nina Baym, Introduction to *The Lamplighter*, xvi.


Ibid.: 58.

Ibid.: 7.

Ibid.: 76.

Ibid.: 78-79.

440 Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 62.

441 Ibid.: 83.

442 Ibid.: 64.

443 Ibid.: 67.

444 Ibid.: 68.

445 Ibid.: 103.

446 Stowe. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 316.


450 Sánchez-Eppler, *Dependent States*, 72.


452 Ibid.: 5.

453 *Aunt Mary’s Picture Book: Little Eva, the Flower of the South*, 8.

454 Stowe. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 38.

455 Ibid.: 46.

456 Ibid.: 52.

457 Ibid.: 51.

458 Harriet Beecher Stowe, “The Education of Freedmen. Part 1,” *North American Review*. 128: 271 (1879): 613; These educational endeavors echo some of the same images that Emerson and Thoreau denounce, such as the adult citizen repeating the spelling book. Stowe quotes from a report of the Freedman’s Bureau which states that “all classes, even those advanced in life . . . are beginning the alphabet—coming to evening and Sabbath schools, and may be seen along railroads, or off duty, as servants on steamboats, or in hotels, earnestly studying their spelling-books.”


460 Not surprisingly, African American critics have analyzed Stowe in light of these patronizing descriptions. Most famously, James Baldwin, in “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” attacks Stowe for emasculating Tom and robbing him of his humanity. Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (New York: Signet Classic, 1997), which similarly asserts black adulthood and masculinity, resists Stowe’s cloying images of slave readers studying their spelling books by presenting a
de-sentimentalized vision of the slave’s literacy acquisition. His story of being taught to read by little white boys who he converts “into teachers” simultaneously replicates and inverts the picture-book images of Eva at the chalkboard. Though he gains “sympathy” from some of the boys, he just as frequently has to trick them into helping him by pretending he knows more than he does. In addition, his ability to read hardly leads to the docility and sentimental pleasure that Stowe and her adapters imagine. He claims that reading actually made his ability to tolerate his situation worse, creating not a sentimental bond between citizens, but hatred and grief:

The more I read, the more I as led to abhor and detest my enslavers . . . I loathed them as being the meanest as well as the most wicked of men. As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! that very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish.


463 Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin Pictures and Stories, 24.