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Published In

Patrick C. Flemming. "The Delight of Our Earlier Days": Character, Narrative, and The Village School. Journal of Narrative Theory 43.1 (Winter 2013): 19–40.

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"The Delight of Our Earlier Days": Character, Narrative, and *The Village School*

by Patrick C. Fleming

In 1870, Charlotte Yonge published an anthology of children's tales entitled *A Storehouse of Stories*. The "golden age of children's literature" was well under way by this time, and Yonge's anthology would have had to compete with works like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Rather than publish original tales, though, Yonge thought back to her own childhood:

> the class of books which worthy mothers recommended to the exclusion of the fairy tale in the last decades of the eighteenth century has, it seems to us, met with somewhat unmerited contempt. Judging from our own childhood, we find that we preferred the inherited books of the former generation to any of our own. (v)

A Storehouse of Stories reprints tales from these "inherited books," tales which Yonge felt were "the delight of our earlier days" (vii). Critics, however, have not always found these tales so delightful. Scholars initially dismissed these books as merely didactic predecessors to the more imaginative children's literature of the Victorian period. In last two decades, more historically minded critics have challenged the "Whiggish historical model of progress from quotidian instruction toward the escapist delight of fairy tale and fantasy" that had obscured scholars'

JNT: Journal of Narrative Theory 43.1 (Winter 2013): 19–40. Copyright © 2013 by *JNT: Journal of Narrative Theory.*

"ability to read Georgian moral tales from within their own discourse, code, cultural system, or ideology" (Myers 97–98). Although many critics now read eighteenth-century children's tales from within their own discourses, codes, cultural systems, and ideologies, their arguments typically emphasize systems and ideologies over the formal properties of the works themselves. Jerome McGann's remarks about sentimental poetry could, I think, still be applied to the reception of early children's literature: critics "tend to have little interest in the *art* of this writing, which is interrogated for its social, or moral, or ideological significance" (McGann 96, emphasis original).

In this article, I will explore some of the narrative techniques found in the books that Yonge recalls reading as a child. The usual strategy when approaching these books is to base one's claims on cursory readings of numerous texts. Such a strategy, though, can lead to paradoxical statements about narrative. In *Moral Instruction and Fiction for Children, 1749–1820*, for example, Samuel F. Pickering, Jr. discusses an impressive array of texts. He begins by stating that "few rounded characters of 'mingled virtue and vice' appeared. The overwhelming majority of characters were flat allegorical representations of either virtue or vice" (*Moral Instruction* 2–3); he then later claims that these books promote middle-class values and challenge the aristocracy: "Education and industry formed character and were responsible for success. Along with the inherited wealth or position, even the gifts of fortune, those of heredity itself were suspect" (*John Locke* 88). These are incompatible conceptions of character: if education and industry form character, then characters change—they cannot be "flat allegorical representations of either vice or virtue."

Pickering's study investigates how early children's books reflect the political, social, and gender ideologies of their authors, readers, and publishers, and scholars like Mitzi Myers, Andrew O'Malley, and Beverly Lyon Clark have continued this line of inquiry, bringing serious critical attention to early children's literature. But if we wish to understand the narrative conventions of these stories, a different approach is necessary. I hope to avoid Pickering's paradoxical claims by focusing on only one text: Dorothy Kilner's *The Village School; Or, a Collection of Entertaining Histories, for the Instruction and Amusement of All Good Children* (ca. 1783). This text, which went through at least three editions before

1831 and is included in Yonge's *A Storehouse of Stories*, is fairly typical of late eighteenth-century moral tales, both in its didactic intent and in its narrative. In the dedication, Kilner tells readers that the story should "help to increase your love of goodness, and your abhorrence of every thing that is evil" (1: vii). She expects her readers to love and imitate the good characters, and to abhor, or be disgusted by, the wicked characters—a notion of fiction similar to that which Samuel Johnson promotes in his *Rambler 4* essay. Johnson privileges realism over romance because "what we cannot credit we shall never imitate" (24). His theory of character is mimetic, in two senses: he intends authors to imitate life in their fiction, and readers to recognize and imitate characters' virtues.

In a letter to Robert Skipworth, Thomas Jefferson claims that when we witness or read about a virtuous action "we are deeply impressed with its beauty and feel a strong desire in ourselves of doing charitable and grateful acts also" (qtd. in Haidt 275). That is to say, when we read about virtuous acts, we want to imitate them. Aristotle refers to "the universal pleasure in imitation" (6), and his adherents in the eighteenth century seemed to agree; Edmund Burke's three societal passions are sympathy, ambition, and "imitation, or, if you will, a desire of imitating, and consequently a pleasure in it" (45). The belief that readers will take pleasure in imitating virtuous acts underlies Johnson's belief that works of fiction are "of greater use than the solemnities of professed morality, and convey the knowledge of vice and virtue with more efficacy than axioms and definitions" (23). Axioms and definitions lack the emotional component that makes the impulse to imitate so strong.

Jonathan Haidt uses the term "elevation" to refer to the emotion "elicited by acts of virtue or moral beauty" (276). He introduces the term as the emotional opposite of disgust, and Johnson likely would have agreed with such a contrast. The "universal pleasure in imitation" is problematic for Johnson's theory of fiction because there are "those parts of nature" which are *not* proper for imitation:

> Many writers, for the sake of following nature, so mingle good and bad qualities in their principal personages that they are both equally conspicuous; and as we accompany them through their adventures with delight, and are led by degrees to interest ourselves in their favor, we lose the ab-

> horrence of their faults because they do not hinder our pleasures, or perhaps regard them with some kindness for being united with so much merit. (23)

Here imitation is unwanted: if we read "with delight" even those stories that "mingle good and bad qualities," the danger is that we will imitate the bad as well as the good. Readers should imitate virtue as portrayed in a text, but vice, says Johnson, "should always disgust" (24). Disgusting imitation, then, can be seen as the inverse of pleasurable imitation: if readers' reaction towards virtue is mimetic, their reaction towards vice can be termed emetic.

This distinction between mimetic and emetic helps elucidate the kinds of characters that Kilner depicts in *The Village School*: readers, for example, should love (and imitate) Frank West and abhor Bill Crafty. Yet Frank and Bill are not merely allegorical representations of virtue and vice. To understand why, we must explore how each character features in the narrative. Frank and Bill first appear in chapter two, when Frank brings his two-year-old brother Joe to school with him. Somebody pulls Joe's hair, and the teacher, Mrs. Bell, responds: "I hope, said she, there is not any body so wicked as to hurt this poor little boy":

> They all said they had not touched him; and Master *Bill Crafty* said, it would be a shame to hurt such a good child. "Come here, little *Joe*, said he, I will shew you a picture in my book;" then, letting his book fall, he told *Joe* to pick it up, and whilst he was stooping to get it, gave him a kick in the face, and made his nose bleed sadly. (1: 17)

Kilner has two tasks in this scene. The first is to make the event into a moral lesson. Bill has lied and kicked another child, but the lesson is not, in this case, about violence or dishonesty. When Mrs. Bell asks Bill "what was the reason he behaved so wickedly," he replies that he did it to tease Frank:

> you always say he reads better than I do, and call him a good boy oftener than you do me; and you gave him a new

> book last *Monday*, and did not give me one. . . . I don't like he should be called so. . . . for he is only a *shoemaker*'s son, only a *poor boy*, and I am a *young gentleman.*" (1: 18–19, emphasis original)

Bill's actions stem from envy and social prejudice, the evils that Kilner wishes to highlight in this scene. An adult (which is, as I will argue, a formal category) interprets the events. When Mrs. Bell tells Bill, "I think *poor* boys are just as good as *young gentlemen*; and better too when they behave better" (1: 19), the reader should recognize the precept from the scene's example, and Kilner presents it in the voice of an adult.

Kilner's second task in this scene, in addition to teaching a lesson about envy and prejudice, is to establish Bill Crafty's character. His allegorical name implies dishonesty, and indeed dishonest is how he is introduced to the reader—his first action is to lie. He is also cruelly violent, evidenced by his giving a two-year-old boy "a kick in the face" in a scene that is deliberately excessive and should make readers disgusted. But these are markers of character, not the lesson that Kilner teaches through the scene. Establishing Bill's character is a means to an end. Once the reader recognizes that he is essentially wicked, his actions for the rest of the story can be presented as negative examples. The clear message is "Don't be like Bill Crafty," and the reader remembers this message when Bill lies about being sick in order to avoid being kept at school (1: 58–59) or when he doesn't do his homework (2: 75).

The danger of fantasy, in Johnson's terms, is that "what we cannot credit, we shall never imitate" (24). For Kilner, the corollary "what we cannot credit will never disgust us" also applies. What keeps Bill from being a mere allegorical representation of wickedness is that he wants to be better. He is angry because Mrs. Bell calls Frank "a good boy," while telling him, "You are a sad naughty boy, indeed . . . and I do not think I shall ever be able to call you good again. If you wish to be called so, why are you *not* good?" (1: 18–19, emphasis original). Mrs. Bell later tells him that he "might not come to her school any more, unless he became good, as she should not chuse he should keep company with her good scholars" (1: 60). Mrs. Bell follows through on her threat and Bill is expelled, but he must reform, and so must return to the school, if he is to remain part of the narrative. When he returns, the reader is told that "Master *Bill* had been so

punished, and suffered so very much, that he began to think he had better be good than naughty" (1: 98). The first volume ends here, suggesting that Bill has in fact changed his character. His reform, however, is only temporary, for in the second volume, he is classified, once again, with the emetic characters. Kilner's didactic mode makes the permanent reform of this inherently wicked character impossible.

While it is tempting to see Mrs. Bell as the authorial voice and to see her judgments as those of Kilner, the parallel breaks down in the scene just described. As a teacher, Mrs. Bell wants her pupils to improve, and the presence of wicked children hinders this goal. Kilner, by contrast, absolutely *does* want "bad boys" among the other children: their presence is a key feature of her didactic form. Kilner means to instruct the reader, not the characters, and she certainly does not want to send the message that children who misbehave are doomed to perpetual wickedness or can be conveniently removed from society. Kilner's goal, then, is different from Mrs. Bell's. Her emetic characters are trapped in a cycle of misbehavior and punishment, which can end only with their removal from the story (as when Harry Sturdy is sent to a different, and supposedly even more violent, school [2: 80]).

Kilner cannot simply dispose of all the emetic characters by removing them from the story, especially having spent so much time developing their personalities. Emetic characters are essential to her narrative, as foils against which to demonstrate the morality of characters like Frank West. In response to Bill's complaint, Mrs. Bell remarks, "*Frank West* is a very good boy, and takes a great deal of pains to read well, and that is the reason I gave him a book" (1: 19). Kilner here begins to develop Frank, one of her unequivocally mimetic characters, and this speech is for the reader's benefit as much as Bill's. Just as violence and dishonesty establish Bill's character, Frank's industry establishes his. He remains a positive example throughout the story as he helps a chimney sweeper (1: 70), honestly praises his schoolmates (2: 44), and does his homework (2: 75). When Frank returns home after Bill's attack, he tells his father, "if poor *Joe* is to suffer for it, I wish I did not read so well" (1: 29). Frank is caught between two virtues: sympathy for his brother and an industrious desire to please. As in the previous scene, an adult provides the "correct" interpretation of the events. Mr. West tells his son,

> never wish you was [*sic*] not so good, you may be sure it is always best to be good; for, though Master *Crafty*, and such foolish children as he is, may dislike you for not being as naughty as himself, yet all *good* people, and those who have sense, will always love a *good* child; and the better you are, will like you the more. (1: 29, emphasis original)

Like Mrs. Bell's speech to Bill Crafty, Mr. West's speech separates happiness from social class. Frank repeats the lesson in his own words, telling his father, "I had better be poor and good, than rich and naughty" (1: 30).

Mr. West's reference to Bill Crafty as representative of "foolish children" underscores what I've said about Kilner's use of emetic characters, for the word "foolish" juxtaposes such children with "those who have sense." The implication is that "foolish children" like Bill cannot learn to be good, but good children, it seems, can learn to be even better: Frank accepts the precept that his father offers. After Frank replies to his father's interpretation with "I think as you do, father," Mr. West rewards him with "a nice slice of cold plum-pudding" (1: 30). The lesson here reinforces the previous scene: one should not be envious of others and should be good regardless of what others may think. There is some ambiguity, however, whether Frank has really learned anything or is simply conditioned to respond correctly in order to receive the reward of plum pudding. In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), John Locke had warned about pedagogical systems that train the appetite: "He that will give to his Son *Apples* or *Sugar-plumbs*," or "what else of this kind he is most delighted with," "does but authorize his love of pleasure" (51). Frank's response and subsequent reward seem just the kind of pedagogy that Locke wishes to avoid.

To understand the system of rewards and punishments that Kilner presents, we must examine those characters who administer this justice: the adults. Mrs. Bell's authority extends only so far, and when the children leave school, the job of reward or punishment lies with their parents. The parents, who play a major role in *The Village School*, must remain moral authorities if they are to reward and punish their children, and the parents of emetic characters present a particular challenge. Frank's goodness is attributed to his family, "very good people" who "lived very happy" (1: 16). Nonetheless, Mrs. Bell tells Bill Crafty that "[t]hough one child's father

happens to be richer than another's, that [wealth] makes no difference at all in the children" (1: 19). The substance of these statements exemplifies the middle-class morality that Kilner promotes: happiness and wealth are separate categories. Yet wealth is not necessarily associated with wickedness. Indeed, later in the story Mrs. Bell remarks, "*many* ladies and gentleman are very good, and then their riches are of great use, not only to themselves, but to other people" (1: 52, emphasis original). Bill Crafty is wicked despite his father's wealth, not because of it. So while Frank is associated with his family, Bill is distanced from his.

Kilner allows for mimetic families, but not emetic families. The result is that allegorical names do not carry the weight they otherwise might. Most characters' surnames tell something about their personalities: mimetic characters have names like Right and Steadfast; emetic characters have names like Crafty, Sneak, and Dawdle. For the former, the name reflects a familial trait—Mr. Right and Mr. Steadfast are mimetic characters, like their children—but while Bill Crafty's surname reveals his deceitfulness, the same is not true of his parents: the text cannot portray the adult Mr. Crafty as dishonest. Kilner sidesteps this problem by keeping the elder Craftys out of the story—it is always a servant who retrieves Bill from school and relays messages like "I am sure his papa and mamma do not like naughty boys" (1: 27). Mr. Heady and Mr. Sneak (fathers of Ben and Jack, respectively) do, however, appear in the story. Whenever possible, Kilner refers to them as "Ben's (or Jack's) father," but this strategy only avoids the problem, it does not solve it.

Catherine Gallagher argues that we can date the rise of the novel to the eighteenth century in part because eighteenth-century writers were the first to distinguish their writing both from factual account and from allegory. In the novel, says Gallagher, "probability itself was rediscovered as a sign of the fictional" (341). She phrases her argument in terms of readers, who know themselves to be real, independent selves and thus recognize that fictional characters, however realistic, exist only textually, in "a finite set of sentences" (358). Critics of children's literature such as Alan Richardson also focus on the reader:

> The ruling notion of childhood innocence and simplicity affects the narrative poetics of children's texts no less than their manifest content. The requirement for simplicity and

> "artlessness" underwrites any number of formal constraints identified by recent theorists of children's narrative. (144)

Perry Nodelman challenges the notion of simplicity, speaking specifically of Edgeworth's "The Purple Jar" but applying the idea to children's literature in general: "The simple text implies an unspoken and much more complex repertoire that amounts to a second, hidden text—what I will call the 'shadow text'" (8). Despite the contrast between Richardson's notion of a narrative poetics that relies on simplicity and Nodelman's conclusion that such seeming simplicity implies a more complex "shadow text," both phrase their arguments in terms of adult and child, and if we connect their ideas to Gallagher's, then we must conclude that adulthood and childhood are textual (that is, formal) properties. In a realist text about children, we would expect adult characters, especially parents, to be primarily caregivers. With the moral tale, though, textual relationships take precedence. Didacticism supersedes probability, and the most important roles that adults play are those of moral interpreters and administrators of justice.

The adult whose presence is most felt in *The Village School* is Mrs. Bell. The opening paragraph introduces her as "a very good woman, who was so kind as to keep a school to teach little boys and girls to read" (1: 9). Later, however, when Bill Crafty kicks Joe, Mrs. Bell is not so kind:

> Mrs. *Bell*, who happened to see him, was, you may be sure, extremely angry, and calling him to her, she took off his coat, and beat him very much with a cane she kept on purpose to beat naughty children. She then tied his hands behind him, and his legs together, and assured him that he should not go home that night, but that, when school was over, she would shut him up in a closet. (1: 17–18)

The punishment here is immediate and severe. Physical punishment is Mrs. Bell's chosen method throughout the story, and despite claims about her kindness and assurance that she "was always very good-natured, and never chose to inflict any punishment when she could possibly do without" (2: 88), she seems at times to revel in punishing her students. When she has a new cane brought from London, she tells the children, "I hate the sight of each [*sic*] ugly things, and would rather it should live in the cup-

board, than ever come out to shew itself; but if children will be naughty, Mr. *Tickleboy* must walk out" (2: 79). Mrs. Bell attributes the action to the cane, rather than to herself, and the nickname undermines her stated reluctance to use it.

Mrs. Bell governs the children when they are in school, but much of the action takes place elsewhere, either in Mr. Right's field, where the children play, or in the village. Mr. Right is a constant authority figure, but he and Mrs. Bell also call on the children's parents to participate in the system of discipline in their absence. When Mr. Right catches Ben Heady and Jack Sneak destroying some girls' flower arrangement, he tells the boys' fathers:

> *Ben Heady*'s father, as soon as ever he heard it, took up a great horse-whip which lay upon the table, and threshed [*sic*] him very much indeed. . . . *Jack Sneak* did not escape much better, for his father gave him a box on the ear, and then pushed him into a little closet, where he had no room to stir or move. (1: 39)

There seems to be a tension, in such scenes, between adult-as-caregiver and adult-as-administrator-of-punishment, and the latter wins out.

The most shocking scene in *The Village School*, however, is when a father punishes a child other than his own. When Jacob Steadfast and Harry Sturdy are walking home from school, Harry tries to convince Jacob to sell a silver pocket-watch that his mother has given him. Harry lists all the items that Jacob could buy with the money (marbles, a bat and ball, a top, a skipping-rope) and calls him foolish for not selling the pocket-watch. Jacob replies, "What! foolish to mind what my mother told me?" (2: 10). Harry encourages Jacob to lie to his mother and tell her that he lost it, but

> Just as [Harry] had finished these words, Mr. *Steadfast*, who had been walking in a field on the other side of the hedge, and had heard all that passed between his son and *Harry*, jumped over the bank, and taking hold of *Sturdy*, thrashed him most heartily (as he well deserved) with a cane which he had in his hand. . . . He then took hold of his arm, and made him go with him directly home. (2: 11–12)

Mr. Sturdy promises to punish Harry further, and the point of view shifts to first person: the narrator claims never to have heard precisely how Harry is punished, "though, I dare say it was severe, for he was never once seen out of doors for a week afterwards" (2: 15).

If Kilner is willing to portray Mr. Steadfast thrashing Harry "most heartily," one shudders to think what lies in store for him at home, but the presence of Mr. Steadfast looming behind a hedge is even more ominous. While Mrs. Bell, as a schoolteacher, is endowed with at least some authority to administer punishments to her students, Mr. Steadfast's only claim to such authority is that he is an adult. This, then, is the reason why *The Village School* cannot allow for an emetic adult character: if every adult is allowed to administer such punishments, then adulthood itself must be endowed with the moral authority not only to correctly interpret children's actions, but also to punish them.

Kilner's system of punishments is a bodily one: adults physically punish children when they misbehave. Considering this punishment in terms of contemporary pedagogical theories may help explain the very strange ending of *The Village School*, which has troubled many critics and has been the focal point for most discussions of this work. In the final scene, Mrs. Bell witnesses a mother weeping for her son, who is on his way to jail. After the mother sprains her ankle, and Mrs. Bell takes her into the house for the night, she leaves a candle burning, which catches the house on fire and burns it down. The last lines of the work are as follows:

> Some bones were the next day found in the rubbish, but the flesh was so entirely consumed as to make it impossible to distinguish Mrs. *Bell* from the poor woman she had charitably assisted. . . . From this fatal accident it is to be hoped, that every body will learn to be extremely cautious not to leave any candles burning near linen, or any where, without constantly watching, that they may do no mischief. (2: 105)

The banality of this final moral lesson contrasts starkly with the image of burnt flesh that precedes it. Humphrey Carpenter and Mari Prichard call this ending "a convenient conclusion to the otherwise endless tale" (558); Mary Jackson sees it the "one real excitement which not even the moral that Kilner draws (to be careful with candles) can dampen" (147). Picker-

ing agrees, and notes that since *The Village School* is not a boarding-school story, the usual conclusion, in which the protagonist leaves to go home, is not possible. Kilner instead becomes a "narrative arsonist" (*John Locke* 203). Beverly Lyon Clark is more generous in her interpretation of the ending. She concludes that

> By insisting on pointing an unrelated little lesson, the narrator partly plasters over the obvious moral of the fatal event, but she also reminds us to seek morals and hence to recognize the obvious one. For surely the fire shows us that—contrary to the message of the rest of the book—virtue can go unrewarded in this world. Thus does the book undermine its own premises, as it undermines Mrs. Bell's. (58)

I agree that Mrs. Bell is implicated in this ending, but I disagree with Clark's reading that the moral is that virtue may go unrewarded; indeed, in Locke's pedagogical system, virtue is its own reward. The problem that the ending underscores has to do more with Mrs. Bell's system of rewards and punishments. Andrew O'Malley notes that *The Village School*, in its violent punishments, "depicts a method of discipline seemingly out of step with the pedagogical authorities of the age" (98). In moral tales, mimetic characters are rewarded, emetic characters are punished, and there is usually "a clear logic to the punishment" (O'Malley 99). In the first scene that I described, for example, Bill Crafty is physically hurt because he physically hurts Joe. This educational strategy may be "out of step" with contemporary theories of education, but it is consistent with Kilner's narrative. The methods of discipline acceptable to "the pedagogical authorities of the age" would require a different kind of narration. Locke favors esteem and disgrace over material rewards and punishments, but these are emotional states and Kilner's text focuses exclusively on actions. This tension is similar to that between Kilner as author and Mrs. Bell as fictional preceptor. Kilner wishes her young readers to learn by observing the examples of children being physically punished, but she does *not* wish to endorse actual physical punishment. When Mrs. Bell is consumed in her own school, through her own act of charity, she is literally consumed by her own morality. Her pedagogical practices, therefore, are contained within

the pages of the story: physical punishments serve a textual purpose without being allowed to escape the confines of the narrative.

Reading Kilner's ending in this manner requires a bit of interpretive work, but interpretation is a defining feature of the moral tale: one of the primary functions of adults is to ensure that child characters (and readers) draw the correct conclusions from the stories that they are told and the events that they experience. As we question how to interpret *The Village School*, we must examine how the work interprets itself; that is, how the adult characters interpret the stories embedded within the frame narrative. After attacking Harry Sturdy, Mr. Steadfast tells his son the story of Ralph Breakclod, a variation on the boy who cried wolf. Ralph is supposed to carry a pie to his grandmother's house, but instead tells his parents that the pie was ruined when a horse cart ran him down. His parents eventually learn that Ralph, who has a history of lying, ate the pie himself and lied about the horse. Later, as he is carrying another pie, a carriage really does run him down. His parents do not believe him, refusing to look at his "shockingly bruised" back (2: 32), and Ralph dies of his wounds. Mr. Steadfast tells Jacob, "unless *Harry Sturdy* is heartily sorry for what he said to you, and takes care never to deceive any body again as long as he lives, I dare say he will come to be as unhappy as *Ralph* was" (2: 36).

Jacob, however, does not agree with his father's interpretation. After he asks, "was it not very cross that neither Mr. or Mrs. *Breakclod* would look at *Ralph*'s back, when he first told them how bad it was?" Mr. Steadfast responds, "No, my dear, indeed I do *not* think it was" (2: 38, emphasis original). Mr. Steadfast closes off any unwanted interpretations of the story. Jacob, like Frank West, is rewarded once he finally accepts his father's interpretation (Frank, we remember, is rewarded with plum pudding for his remark "I think as you do, father" [1: 30]). After talking with his own father, Jacob receives, as a present, the bat and ball that he would have bought with the money which Harry Sturdy offered him for the watch (2: 38), managing to obtain the desired material rewards without risking punishment. Both Jacob and Frank ultimately accept their father's interpretations, but, as Locke warns, whether this means that the boys have really become virtuous or they have simply learned to pander to adults is uncertain.

Jacob's initial misconception of his father's tale demonstrates a larger issue within the text, the potential for misinterpretation. This issue comes

to the fore again with the story of the chimneysweeper. Frank and Jenny meet the chimneysweeper after he has stolen a roll from a baker, who catches and beats him. They wash and bandage his head and give him some money. When they tell their story to the other students, however, Tom Rigid responds, "he deserved to have his head broke for being so naughty as to steal a roll. . . . If *I* had met with him, I should have told him so, and not have given him my money" (1: 70–71, emphasis original). Tom reasons from his own experience here. He is accustomed to Mrs. Bell's system of rewards and punishments, and he knows that he would be beaten if he had stolen a roll. Nonetheless, the lesson that Mrs. Bell wishes him to take from this scene is about pity. She tells Tom:

> you, Master *Rigid*, don't *know* how great the *pain* of *hunger* is. . . . poor children often have very little, not so much in the whole day as you can eat at dinner . . . the want of money was the cause of his committing the crime. Had he had the halfpenny and silver penny sooner, which *Frank* and *Jenny* so kindly gave him, he would not, I dare say, have been guilty of it. (1: 71–73, emphasis original)

Mrs. Bell praises Frank and Jenny for their charity, and in her interpretation of the morning's events, Frank and Jenny have done the chimneysweeper a double service: they helped him temporarily in this instance and they provided a more permanent lesson by advising him, in the future, to ask Mr. Right for food instead of stealing.

There is a class issue here, of course: the chimneysweeper is clearly of a lower class than Mrs. Bell's students. Yet the scene demonstrates a formal feature of *The Village School* as well. When praising Frank and Jenny, Mrs. Bell briefly shifts the focus from her students to the chimneysweeper. Neither the reader nor the protagonists of *The Village School* need to be told that stealing is "naughty." The logic of the text requires the reader to accept certain behavioral axioms. When Bill Crafty first appears in the story, for example, the reader does not have to be informed that he is wrong to hurt Joe and lie about it (even Bill knows that his behavior is unacceptable and tries to hide his actions from Mrs. Bell). His violence and dishonesty are markers of character, unequivocally wicked actions that, in

the text, are merely symptoms of envy and prejudice, the real substance of Kilner's instruction.

The chimneysweeper seems to lack the foundational morality of Mrs. Bell's students. He is as an object of pity rather than a character. The students know that stealing is wrong and would expect punishment for it. Indeed, the chimneysweeper *is* punished for it (he is beaten by the baker), as Mrs. Bell points out: "to be sure, [stealing] was *very* wrong, and you see what the consequence has been" (1: 71, emphasis original). Such consequences, or in other words punishments and rewards, are the core of Kilner's text. In the episode of the chimneysweeper, however, the focus is on the causes. Mrs. Bell tells her students, "the want of money was the cause of his committing the crime" (1: 73). Certainly, this is not the lesson that the students (or the readers) are meant to learn from this scene. Mrs. Bell makes clear that the students should understand not only the chimneysweeper's motives, but also that he is a different kind of person: "another excuse we may make for the chimneysweeper, which could not be made for any of you, is that he had never been taught what is *right* or *wrong*. . . . If any of *us* were to steal, or take what does not belong to us, *we should* deserve to have our heads broken" (1: 72, emphasis original). The problem is not that the chimneysweeper is wicked (like Bill Crafty), but that he "had never been taught what is right or wrong." Kilner denies the chimneysweeper the moral knowledge that the other characters possess. As is often the case in sentimental narratives, to pity the chimneysweeper is, in part, to deny his humanity: he becomes an *object* of pity.

To reinforce the lesson, Kilner embeds another story, "The History of the *Chickens* and the *Horse*, and the *Boy* and the *Wasp*," in which a boy is told to take care of some chickens and to keep them from wandering into the horses' stable (1: 80). The boy tries to reason with the chickens: "He talked to them a great deal of the hazard they ran of being hurt, and tried to persuade them not to go [into the stable]" (1: 81). When the chickens are trampled, the boy laments, "How silly it was, that you would not mind me, chickens, you might then have still been alive and merry; but you would not mind what I said" (1: 82). The boy is shocked that his rational pedagogy doesn't work, but his father explains: "I think, my boy, you talk very reasonably if your chickens could understand what you say, yet, that you know they cannot; but as *you* have sense to understand what *I* say to you" (1: 82, emphasis original). He then leaves a basket of peaches and in-

structs the boy not to eat them. Of course, the boy does only to be stung by a wasp. The father returns to relate the precept that the story supposedly teaches: "I know what is right as much better than you do, as you do better than a chicken; and if you will not shew more sense than they do, by minding what is said, you must suffer for it" (1: 85). The story of the chickens and the wasp underscores the lesson that Mrs. Bell wishes the students to learn from the episode with the chimneysweeper: children should learn and accept adults' interpretations of what is right and wrong.

Kilner, however, draws a very different moral from almost the same story in the poem "On a Young Lady Being Stung by a Wasp."[1] In this short ballad, a girl wants to get a particularly succulent-looking plum from a tree. But when she bites into it, she discovers that there is a wasp inside, which stings her. The last two stanzas deliver the moral:

> Learn hence, then, my love, and this maxim attend,
> Ne'er to trust to a gilded outside;
> Since what to the eye may the fairest appear
> The basest intention may hide.
> 'Tis *virtue* alone, deep lodg'd in the heart,
> Can merit our love or delight:
> Then search for *interior* perfection to find,
> Nor trust to what pleases your sight. (58–59, emphasis original)

When we pair this poem, which is about looking beyond surface appearances, about not about listening to adults, with the story of the boy and the wasp in *The Village School*, the connection between story and moral (example and precept) seems particularly tenuous. There is no moral inherent in a child's finding a wasp in a piece of fruit: it takes an adult to provide the moral.

In Jacob's reaction to his father's story, Tom Rigid's comment on the chimneysweeper, and the story of the boy and the wasp, Kilner presents three instances of potential misinterpretation. In each, the boys is corrected by an adult: an adult who acts as a moral guide, as well as an arbiter of justice and administrator of punishment, and whose role in the story is to control the reader's interpretation. Like Jacob and Frank, Roger Riot

misinterprets the stories intended to instruct him and openly questions the very notion that stories can be instructional. Mr. Right tells the children,

> to make a proper use of books, is to read them, and to mind the good things they teach . . . For there is no use in them if you do not *mind* what you read.
>
> *Roger Riot* said, he never thought of minding what was in books, he only read them for the sake of knowing pretty stories, and he thought that was all books were made for . . . when books are about cows, or horses, or dogs, or birds, what good can they do? or what can we learn from them? (2: 61–62, emphasis original)

In response, Mr. Right tells the story of two dogs, one ugly but well behaved and the other handsome but ill natured. As expected, the well-behaved dog is ultimately well loved, while the ill-natured dog meets his end biting the heels of a horse, which "dashed his brains out" (2: 68). When the story is finished, Roger replies, "I like it very well; but I do not see what I can learn from it, except that cross dogs will not be liked as well, or live as comfortably as good natured ones" (2: 69–70). Mr. Right provides the correct interpretation: the story is an allegory, and cross boys are like cross dogs. The narrator, who confirms this interpretation, adds that if it was bad for the dog to misbehave, "how very bad it must be in *us*, who have sense and understanding to know what is right and wrong?" (2: 71, emphasis original). The lesson here is the same as in the episodes of the chimneysweeper and the chickens. Roger, however, misses the point: unlike Jacob and Frank, he never grasps the "proper use" of the story.

Most of Kilner's child characters are either mimetic or emetic. Roger, however, presents a challenge to the text's didactic form. He first appears to be an emetic character. After Mr. Right breaks up a fight between Ben Heady and Jack Sneak, he learns that Roger and Ben were teasing some girls collecting flowers, and that Jack had tried to steal some of the flowers while the girls were distracted, prompting Ben to attack him. Mr. Right orders Ben, Roger, and Jack to apologize:

> I will send all three of you home to your parents, and desire them to punish you as you deserve; nor shall either of you

> play again in my field, till you have acknowledged your faults, and asked pardon for what you have done.
>
> *Roger* said, he was very sorry for having behaved wrong, that he did not *think* its being ill-natured, and only made the girls run for fun; and that he was very willing not only to beg their pardon, but would also help them to gather some more flowers. (1: 37, emphasis original)

Neither Jack nor Ben apologizes, and both are sent home and punished by their fathers, whereas the rest of the children continue to play and Mr. Right rewards them with cakes (1: 40). This scene is mostly consistent with Kilner's didactic mode: the bad children are beaten, and the good children are rewarded with sweets. Roger, though, does not fit either category. He misbehaves, but then immediately apologizes and avoids punishment. (Kilner does not explicitly say whether he is among the children rewarded with cake.) Rather than a purely emetic character, Roger is "generally a very good-tempered boy, though he sometimes was a little forgetful" (1: 42).

After the incident in the field, Mr. Right hopes that Roger "should *always* think what was right or wrong, before he did any thing" (1: 38). Roger, however, does not learn this lesson. Later, after leaving school with the rest of the children, he sees four-year-old Jemmy Flint sitting by the side of a well:

> [Roger] ran to him with a design of frightening him, by making him believe he would put him down; but happening to run against him, and push him harder than he intended, he did throw him down in earnest, and into the well poor little *Jemmy* tumbled. . . . when at last they got him up, he was quite dead. (1: 88–89)

Given the violent punishments that other children receive for lying or not doing their homework, one might expect Roger to be punished severely for killing another child, but Mr. Right only "talked a great deal to him" (1: 91). Mr. Right reminds him of the earlier scene, when the girls were accidentally hurt in what the boys thought was just good fun. He tells Roger, "by not minding my advice, you have killed one of your play-fellows. Do you consider how wicked it is to kill people? And that those who

do so must be hanged?" Roger tells him that he only meant to frighten Jemmy, not to kill him, and Mr. Right responds, "It is a foolish, ill-natured, very wrong thing, to try to frighten any body" (1: 92). Roger, after promising "to be more careful of his behaviour for the future, walked home very gravely" (1: 93).

This episode, and the story's fiery ending, are the only scenes in *The Village School* that result in death. Kilner presents a specious moral about candles for the ending and provides a similarly specious moral here: the narrator blames Jemmy, in addition to Roger, and tells the reader, "I hope this will be a warning to all children, neither to go too near the water, nor to push or drive others about without seeing where they are going, or how much they may hurt one another" (1: 94). Logically, this interpretation fits Kilner's didactic mode, since Jemmy suffers the consequences of his own action (going too near the well). Nonetheless, the events of the story do not support this interpretation. Like Mrs. Bell's death from leaving a candle burning, Jemmy's death is clearly an accident, not a punishment administered by an authority figure.

As I have argued, Kilner resorts to Mrs. Bell's death because her pedagogical method, while narratively useful, is out of step with the pedagogical theories of her contemporaries and needs to be contained within the narrative. Roger represents another dilemma for Kilner's narrative. Clark writes,

> perhaps Roger is not so wrong. For even though he has not made the equation between dogs and people, he has seen to the economic heart of Mr. Right's message. . . . We may be meant to dismiss Roger's comments, both because we know he is a naughty boy . . . and because he misses part of the allegory. Yet perhaps he sees the Emperor's New Clothes more truly than the adult authorities do. And thereby, in sketching a child's perspective, the book starts dismantling adult preachments. (57)

Clark sees Roger as a voice that empowers childhood and challenges the oppressive reign of the adults. I see Roger differently. What makes Roger differ from Jacob and Frank (mimetic characters who also misinterpret the stories told to them) is that he never confirms Mr. Right's interpretation.

Jacob and Frank verbally agree with their fathers and are rewarded for doing so. Roger does not. Kilner never reveals whether Roger has learned his lesson, and Roger never earns a reward by coming to the correct conclusion about a story. He occupies a kind of liminal space between the mimetic and emetic characters, and is the only character whose actions do not seem consistent with his disposition. Frank and Jacob behave appropriately and agree with the adults' interpretations, at least once they have been told what the proper interpretations are. Bill Crafty is wicked, and despite his envy of Frank's goodness, he makes no efforts to improve himself: he does not apologize or show remorse for his actions. Roger, however, continually misbehaves but regrets it.

In Roger Riot, Kilner introduces into *The Village School* a hint of a different kind of narration, one that allows for characters' interiority. Like Mrs. Bell's death, the character of Roger Riot reveals the limits of Kilner's control over her narrative, limits that are especially problematic in a genre that makes self-control and interpretation its ultimate goals. Kilner works hard to retain what Richardson calls the "ruling notion of childhood innocence and simplicity" (144), but as Nodelman points out, behind this mask of simplicity lies a more complex repertoire, a "shadow text." Many critics, including Nodelman, Maria Nikolajeva, and Peter Hunt, reveal these complexities by approaching children's literature through the lens of narrative theory.[2] They have, however, focused primarily on modern and contemporary works. Earlier tales require a more historicized approach to narrative. Only by recognizing the narrative conventions of Kilner's tales and those of her successors like Thomas Day and Maria Edgeworth can we investigate how these forms might affect adult writing and reading: how, for example, the "delight of her earlier days" may have influenced Charlotte Yonge's novels. Such an investigation has implications not only for literary history and the nineteenth-century novel, but also for how we understand the relationship between our adult selves and our childhood reading. I hope that my reading of *The Village School* helps address this fundamental topic.

Notes

1. This poem appears in Kilner's *Poems on Various Subjects, for the Amusement of Youth* (1782). Although most of the poems in this volume are anonymous, this poem is among those signed with Kilner's pseudonym, "M P."

2. See Maria Nikolajeva's *The Rhetoric of Character in Children's Literature* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2002) and Peter Hunt's "Necessary Misreadings: Directions in Narrative Theory for Children's Literature" (*Studies in the Literary Imagination* 18.2 [Fall 1985]: 107–21).

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