LITERARY NOTICES

HAWKETTNE'S HISTORICAL TALES FOR YOUTH\(^1\). TWO VOLUMES.
BOSTON: TAPAN AND DENNETT, 1842.
2ND EDITION.

AUTHOR UNKNOWN

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When a man of acknowledged genius gives himself to the task of writing books for children, we know not whether to feel more surprise or grateful delight. That one whose pen always commands the loving admiration of his countrymen, should quietly turn aside from the alluring road which was leading him right onward to the height of ambition, to do a work of humble charity, whose silent consciousness must be its only reward, is a rare thing, and as purely beautiful as it is rare. But we are used to look for beautiful things from the author of "Twice Told Tales."\(^2\) It has too

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\(^1\) The subject of this review is Hawthorne's *Historical Tales for Youth*, which was the name publishers used to cover four volumes of *Grandfather's chair*, which are the children's stories the review seems to be referring too. The fourth volume of the stories can be accessed electronically [here](#), and gives a history of the writing and publication of the volumes in the introductory note. The books involve four children who gather around their grandfather's chair to learn about America’s early history—namely the settling of America by Puritan pilgrims (“Hawthorne”). Nathaniel Hawthorne was born in 1804, in Salem, Massachusetts. Hawthorne's most famous work, *The Scarlet Letter*, is widely read and often-required reading in school. In addition, the scarlet ‘A’ is often used, in some form, among pop culture media. In addition to the *The Scarlet Letter* and *Twice Told Tales*, Hawthorne published many other short stories, and was well known among New England society ("Nathaniel Hawthorne – Biography").

\(^2\) An electronic version of the tales can be found [here](#). *Twice Told Tales* was published in 1837, and was Hawthorne’s first literary successes. The tales gathered many favorable reviews, including one from his friend, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.
long been a vulgar error, more deadly than any which the wise Sir Thomas Browne\(^3\) rooted out, that no elderly male or female (of good character) could be too stupid to write a book for children. While the quantity of a child's imagination was as yet hypothetical, it was ingeniously supposed that it had none at all, and, while romance was sternly outlawed from the nursery, pedantic commonplace and mathematical morality, inculcated till dulness and virtue grew in the childish mind to be convertible terms, reigned paramount there. Even that mysterious representation of a supposed female with a helmet (whether Minerva or Joan of Arc was problematical) who directed the gaze of a very curly headed neophyte\(^4\) to where in the proud temple of fame, upon a neighboring eminence, sat the "good boy," studiously perusing Worcester's First Lessons\(^5\), while below, the "naughty boy" lay idly under a tree (probably a birch, prophetic as Dodonian oak to the initiated) even this was banished by the blighting progress of improvement. Nay, that enticing portraiture of the tree of knowledge, laden with ruddy apples (which sad experience afterwards detected as crabs) and wickedly suggestive of orchards and green fields, which erewhile fronted the title-page of spelling-books, with the cabalistic word "frontispiece" engraven thereunder, was torn out. As if learning, with which the fancy and imagination (most active in those unmatterof-fact days) were forbidden to meddle, could be anything better than irksome and disgusting. Thank heaven, that the tales of Joseph and his brethren, of Ruth, and of the Prodigal Son were still open in the Holy Book-perpetual springs where the thirsty young soul might drink in this Sahara of sandy platitudes! Better give a child Jack Sheppard\(^6\) to read, than let its imagination, the pure spring of all religious feeling and aspiration, and all the fair benignities of its nature, pine for lack of food. Better leave a child to mere nature than make it a cyclopaedia of barren commonplaces. Better (to quote once more Lord Brougham's\(^7\) hackneyed phrase) let the schoolmaster be forever abroad, or anywhere else, than have him haunt his young martyrs on the playground, turning their game of ball into a lesson in gravity, and their " hop-scotch " ground into a geometrical diagram.

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\(^3\) Sir Thomas Browne was a 17th century English physician and author. He began his career as a writer with what would become his best-known book, *Religio Medici*. It is a journal largely about the mysteries of God, nature, and man, which he himself described as “a private exercise directed to myself” (“Sir Thomas Browne”).

\(^4\) Neophyte: “a person who is new to a subject” (“Neophyte”)

\(^5\) This is a reference to the American lexicographer Joseph Emerson Worcester, who published a series of 19th century reading books that details rules and instructions for avoiding common errors. The books included lessons for both teachers and pupils (“Joseph Emerson Worcester”). A preview of the book can be found [here](#).

\(^6\) Jack Sheppard was an 18th century English thief who managed four spectacular escapes from London prisons. He was brought up in a workhouse after his father when he was a child, and fell into the company of thieves and prostitutes in Drury Lane. He is favorite figure in verse, popular plays, romances, and burlesques (“Jack Sheppard”).

\(^7\) Refers to Henry Peter Brougham, a British statesman who later became Lord Chancellor of Great Britain (“Henry Brougham, 1st Baron Brougham and Vaux”)
Formerly, the mind was reached through the body and many a hapless urchin had good cause to wish himself at all points physically the cherub which the partiality of maternal fondness bad often metaphorically designated him. This was far better than reaching the body through the soul, and making it precise and patternlike, when it should have revealed in that healthy boisterousness which it was the aim and end of elaborate Goodyism\textsuperscript{8} and Mrs. Barbauldism\textsuperscript{9} to repress. We copy here "the description of a good boy," being the twenty-third lesson in the "Youth's Instructor,"\textsuperscript{10} a manual printed at Boston in 1762. The enticing garb of verse in which our great-grandfathers arrayed their instruction, will amuse our readers.

"The boy that is good
Does mind book well,
And if he can't read,
Will strive for to spell.
"His school he does love,
And when he is there,
For plays and for toys
No time can he spare.

"His mind is full bent
On what he is taught,
He sits in his school
As one full of thought.

"Though not as a mope

\textsuperscript{8} A definition and context of this particular word in the antebellum society could not be found. However, the context of the word and its association of Anna Barbauld (see note 9), is probably some reference to the idea of being a “goody-good”. The idea of and definition of the word--as someone who is “Affectedly sweet, good, or virtuous”--in society today seems to still be what the word’s context in the article suggests (“Goody-goody”).

\textsuperscript{9} A reference to Anna Laetitia Aikin Barbauld, an English woman, who, with her husband, Rochemont Barbauld, established a boarding school, which they managed until 1785. Anna wrote several books on the education of children, and drew heavily upon her own experience with children in her writing (“Anna Laetitia Aikin Barbauld”).

\textsuperscript{10} A reference to one of three popular 18th century spelling books that were designed to teach introduce young children to reading. The three books, Thomas Dyche’s \textit{A Guide to the English Tongue}, Henry Dixon’s \textit{The English Instructor}, and the \textit{Youth's Instructor} (formally titled \textit{The Youth's Instructor in the English Tongue}, and known affectionately during the time as “The New England Spelling Book”) which is a uniquely American compilation of Dixon’s book. The book serves as a manual for both letters & sounds, and arithmetic (“Amory”). An e-version of the text can be found \textit{here}. 
Who quakes out of fear  
The whip or the rod  
May fill to his share.

"But like a good lad  
Who aims to be wise,  
He thinks on his book  
And not on his toys.

"His mien will be grave,  
Yet if you would know,  
He plays with an air,  
When a dunce dare not so.

"His aim is to learn,  
His task is his play,  
And when he has learned,  
He smiles and looks gay."

Compare this with the following instructive parable. "Lesson xxxiv. The FABLE of a stubborn boy". In verse."

"A boy that once to school was sent  
On plays and toys was so much bent,  
That all the art of man, they say"

(Mark the happily implied doubt in this "they say," as if the author could not bring himself to believe that the existence of such a boy was anything more than traditional.)

"Could not once make him say great A.  
His friends that saw him in these fits,  
Cried out, for shame, leave off thy tricks;  
Be not so dull, make it thy play  
To learn thy book: come, say: great A.  
The dunce then gaped, but did no more,  
Great A was then a great eyesore.  
The next boys jog him; sure, say they,  
'T is not so hard to say great A.  
No, no, but. here's the case, says he,  
If I cry A I must cry B,  
And so go on to C and D,  
And that won't do, but still there 's Jod  
Lurks in the way with X Y Zod,
And so no end I find there 'll be
If I but once learn ABC."

(Here the astounding intelligence bursts upon us that the boy's blockishness was but that of another Brutus, and that he knew the alphabet as well as the best of them. His motives are matter of serious conjecture, which we leave to the historical societies.)

"But as things stand, I will not do it,
Tho' sure I am one day to rue it.
At this cross rate the dunce went on
Till one at length a means thought on."

(We are left in doubt as to who thought of the happy expedient, but imagine, from the inventive faculty he displays, it could have been no other than our poet. What the plant was, is also left in sublime vagueness, which finds a parallel in Milton's famous "dreaded name of Demogorgon.")

"A plant, says he, grows near the wood,"

(What Homeric minuteness! not in the wood, but near it.)

"That will not fail to do him good,
And cure his fits while in the bud.
This plant, adds he, will cure his sight,
And with a touch make him grow bright,
At eyes and nose 't will purge the skull
And, drain off all that makes him dull."

But a better day has dawned. We have the charming "Rollo" series¹², and now Mr. Hawthorne is making our New England history as delightful to the children as he has already to the parents. We hope he will not let his labors for the youthful deprive us of his instructions for the more mature, for we all need him, old as well as young. Like a true genius, he has made his own heart the centre from which all his artistic power has emanated, and found his materials around his very door. He has woven the softening halo of romance around the iron visages of the puritans, and intertwined the gentle flowers of love and poesy with the self-inflicted crown of thorns which encircled their gloomy and sallow brows. He has painted the old New England character in true, but soft and harmonious, colors, and illustrated the gentle and more graceful elements of it by the retired simplicity of his life. May

¹² The Rollo Series refers to a series of fourteen children’s books written by Jacob Abbott, one of the most prolific authors of antebellum children’s literature. The central character of the books, Rollo Holiday, was one of the most popular child characters during the time period. He was a model to young readers and taught them practical skills. The publication of the series ran from 1835 to 1842. Rollo is also now one of the best portraits of the lives of children in the antebellum period (“Rollo Series”). Many of the books can be found in e-version online.
the tears which his own tender and exquisite pathos draw from us, be all that we shall ever be called on to shed for him!

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**EDITOR’S NOTE**

The review of Hawthorne’s *Historical Tales for Youth*, was most likely very relevant and pertinent to the times, as the genre of children’s literature was changing in its philosophy and form. Prior to the antebellum period, juvenile literature in America mostly consisted of 18th and 17th century British children’s literature. This literature, inspired partly by the philosophies of Locke and Rousseau, intended on teaching children. Society viewed children as imprintable individuals who could be taught morals and conduct. In this way, the literature was largely didactic. The review alludes to this idea of didacticism in the literature, and considers it a good thing that a “better day has dawned” in the area of children’s literature. The reviewers consider Hawthorne’s piece as part of the new movement of children’s literature, one away from didacticism. Hawthorne’s style was a part of the larger 19th century shift in children’s literature style. The author of the referenced Rollo Series (see note 12), Jacob Abbott led this movement. He “wrote for children, not at them”, and “devised scenarios that brought to life scenes of everyday childhood with a kind of casual fidelity that allowed his readers to recognize reflections of their own experiences within the pages of his books…” (Pandora, 85).

In addition to the shift from didacticism to 19th romanticism, which “produced a body of literature that genuinely belonged to children” (“Children’s Literature”), Antebellum children’s literature also reflects the movement towards understanding and building an “American” identity. Hawthorne’s piece can be seen as a key piece in understanding the establishment of American since it presents a historical account of the beginning years of America and Puritan settlements. The reviewer asserts that Hawthorne has “painted the old New England character in true”. It is interesting that the reviewer uses “New England” here, rather than “American”. It seems as if the reviewer may be distinguishing between two periods in which the Antebellum period was at the crevice of—the old story of “New England” and the new crafting and defining of the “American” republic.

The emphasis on and role literature plays in the societal shifts and movements seems to be a theme present not only in this review, but also in the review of *Nature, A Parable*. Some questions that seem to be raised are what role should literature play in society, and
how should written texts interact with individuals and communities. Another question regards form, and specifically questions what form should be utilized in order to effectively convey beliefs of society or a specific movement. In this piece, the examples provided of colonial and antebellum children’s literature show a contrast in form: antebellum shifts from verse to prose stories. The author’s lack of specific comment on the impact of the change between verse and prose may reveal that the reviewer believes that change in form is natural considering the shift in American culture and the new move to define American society. The association of form and purpose may be understood as linked here, as the ideas around form and purpose are still a big consideration in literary craft today. The impact of a certain form of poetry/prose and form as a way to express content is a big factor in crafting. How language is formed and presented to readers has a large influence on how the content is reflected.

The review of Historical Tales, therefore, not only shows the changing fields of children’s literature, but also provokes thought on the philosophy and theory of literary craft, specifically the relationship between form and content.

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Works Cited

<http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/barbauld/biography.html>.


<http://www,egs.edu/library/nathaniel-hawthorne/biography/>.


