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 **Hawthorne's Nonsexist Narrative Framework: The Real Wonder of *A Wonder Book***

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Hawthorne's Nonsexist Narrative Framework:

The Real Wonder of *A Wonder Book*

Elizabeth Peck (bio)

Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote the entire text of *A Wonder-Book for Girls and Boys* in just forty days during the summer of 1851, but the swiftness of composition belies the long time he had it under consideration. The idea originated in a conversation with Longfellow as early as 1838; in a letter written in March of that year, Hawthorne suggested that by working together they might "entirely revolutionize the whole system of juvenile literature." He also asked, "Ought there not to be a slender thread of story running through the book, as a connecting medium for the other stories?" (Pearce 297-8). Hawthorne proposed that Longfellow write these connective pieces, but when Longfellow failed to respond to the suggested collaboration, Hawthorne continued to map out the project on his own. By the time he wrote his final inquiry to Longfellow in October, 1838, the book had been provisionally titled the "Boy's Wodner Horn" (Pearce 299).

In letters dated March 16, 1843 and April 15, 1846, Hawthorne again mentioned his desire to write a book of classical myths suitable for children, but it was not until April 7, 1851, in a letter to James T. Fields, that he claimed to have begun "to brood seriously" on this project, which he described as not to be "exclusively Fair tales, but intermixed with stories of real life." In an outline sent to Fields on May 23, 1851 he said, "As a frame work, I should have a young college-student telling these stories to his cousins and brothers and sisters, during his vacations, sometimes at the fireside, sometimes in the woods and dells" At the conclusion of this letter Hawthorne asked, "For a title, how would this do? —'A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys'—or 'The Wonder Book of Old Stories'—I prefer the former." And it was the former title that appeared on the volume when it was offered to the public in November 1881.

Reviewing this long period of incubation reveals two significant facts: first, that the interchapters were as important to Hawthorne's conception of the work as were the myths themselves; and, second, that Hawthorne saw fit to change his title from one that addressed itself exclusively to boys to one that included girls. This latter point provides a clue to the truly revolutionary character of the work; while A

Wonder Book is in many respects conventional, the passages Hawthorne wrote to bind together his classical myths defy tradition in an unexpected way. In these connecting passages, Hawthorne not only avoids stereotypic images of girls and boys, but he also uses language that is—especially for the 1850s—remarkably nonsexist. **[End Page 116]**

Hawthorne's fictional group of children is initially described as made up of "not less than nine or ten, . . . nor more than a dozen, of all sorts, sizes, and ages, whether girls or boys" (6). Throughout the interchapters, however, Hawthorne most often refers to this group as a collective unit rather than a gathering of individuals. This, of course, requires consistent and repeated use of plural referents, and—to avoid repetition—an almost unlimited supply of alternatives. The body of children described early on as "brothers, sisters, and cousins, together with a few of their young acquaintances" is thereafter variously referred to by such terms as "little folks," "small people," "juvenile party," "little friends," or "small populace." This plural usage serves as a means of incorporating both the mutual interests and the common activities of *all* Hawthorne's children, both fictional representatives and real life auditors.

Hawthorne's emphasis upon common activity is especially significant because his fictional listeners are depicted as average children; but a Tanglewood (as well as in real life) "average" means vigorous. Consequently, when Hawthorne presents these children at various seasons of the year, he provides them with timely adventures and energetic employments—irrespective of their sexes. Neither girls nor boys are excluded from the October nutting expedition impatiently awaited in "Tanglewood Porch." As a body, these children keep "overflowing the porch," "scampering along the gravel-walk," and "rushing across . . . the lawn," with such speed...

Lively's language has not always been so wide and free as in her journal of Ketchikan and Prince of Wales, but rather to give each resident one page of the pattern of her month in the "language of candle and trick, whose there were in the past afflicting the present" (161). The intrusion of the past not only makes James more aware of its existence in the village, but also gives him a comfortable feeling that there were people who lived there that he would never know. The past becomes almost a companion to him, and that gives him respect for people no longer alive. His defense of rights for the Prince of Wales people to remain unaltered is an indication of that.

My first impression of *The Ghost of Thomas Kemp* was that it was tightly written, with each word out of place. The language is understated, it is not doing the American equivalent for over-indulgence of the superlatives in works for children. Lively's is refreshing and rewarding. Again, as Eleanor Cameron has said, "Lively's style is full of metaphors, mostly original, as their setting . . . and one's impulse develops Lively sense a delight" (12).

My first impression of *The Ghost of Thomas Kemp* was that it was tightly written, with not a word out of place.

I read it hardly want to be the book out on children. The style of an one could guess, were mine. I had used some of Lively's list of British words were to illustrate "plains," "hills," "mountains," "hills," "bluffs," "highways," "lowlands," "ravines," "springs," and "mountain tops" (to name a few) in the hands of my fifth grade class. I had given them up on words like "hill," "dike," and "kern." I had equated "mountain" with a King James Bible passage as a point of instruction for Thomas Kemp's language that occurred in a child's text but I was only with a "reader" translation of the Bible. I had not tried myself with it. While's statement that "children are game for anything" may have words that give us a "hard time." Well, perhaps some children. Not that those students won't be able to

try, but the task was almost overpowering. All the journal entries about translating Beatrix Potter into American English and a limited vocabulary came back to haunt me. I missed the confidence of Thomas Kemp's world.

Lively was more than willing to check out his own and the rest of the local library, and to bear with the difficult handwriting of Aunt Anne and Thomas Kemp. Of course, he was there for the entirety of a ghost. But wonder if under the same circumstances, these upper middle class Americans of Lively would even have tried. I suspect not, the respectability of original forms and it seems to me a deprivation that needs attention. Living in the realm of a language that is constantly changing, children appear nervous, they turn, it is also a past to imagine, and that English is quite legitimately spoken differently, with different words, in different places and different times. Lively's books, in particular *The Ghost of Thomas Kemp*, convey a sense of the past through story or to face it once in a while, and that makes them feel comfortable in the body of children's literature.

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Hawthorne's Nonsexist Narrative Framework: The Real Wonder of *A Wonder Book*

by Elizabeth Peck

Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote the entire text of *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys* in just forty days during the summer of 1841, but the swiftness of composition reflects only time he had at once to complete it. The idea originated in a conversation with Louisa as an early as 1838, or a letter written in March of that year. Hawthorne suggested that by working together they might "constructively remodel the whole system of juvenile literature." He also asked, "Ought there not to be a slender thread of story running through the book, as a connecting cord for the other stories?" (Parker 297-98). How, some suggested, for Louisa had written these narrative pieces, but when Louisa had tried to respond to the suggestion collaboration, Hawthorne continued to work out the project on his own. By the time he wrote his final inquiry to Louisa on 26 October, 1840, the book had been provisionally titled the "Boy's Wonder Book" (Parker 299).

In letters dated March 16, 1841 and April 13, 1841, Hawthorne again mentioned his desire to write a book of "Gossamer" stories suitable for children, but it was not until April 7, 1841, in a letter to James T. Fields, that he claimed to have begun "to proceed seriously" on the project, which he described as not to be "exclusively fair tales, but concerned with various

other bits." It is an earlier version of the book May 27, 1841, he told, "As a frame work, I should have a young and amiable girl taking these stories to his cousins and brothers and sisters, taking his various, sometimes at the breakfast, sometimes in the woods and hills." At the conclusion of this letter Hawthorne asked, "For a title, how would this do? 'A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys'—or 'The Wonder Book of Old courses'—I prefer the former." And it was the former title that appeared on the volume when it was offered to the public in November 1842.

Examining this long period of incubation reveals two significant facts first, that the intentions were to improve on Hawthorne's conception of the work it were the rights themselves and, second, that Hawthorne was fit to change his role from one that addressed the field exclusively to help to one that included girls. This latter point provides a clue to the truly revolutionary character of the work which *A Wonder Book* in many respects anticipated, the passages Hawthorne wrote to bind together his classical myths defy tradition in an unexpected way. In these connecting passages, whether or not they remind someone of the image of girls and boys, but he uses a language that is especially for the girls—remarkably so.



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