

On the Necessary Dangers of Reading with Daughters

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As neuroscientist Marilyn Woolf explains, the fact that humans read just doesn't make sense biologically.¹ In order to read, each human brain must weave together multiple physical structures and build its own system. Yet reading, across many cultures, serves as a main tool for sharing and building knowledge. Put another way, reading is human technology that can be appropriated for evil or for good. It makes a compelling hook in a science fiction story.

Amy Shuffelton explores one component of this unnatural piece of the human social puzzle, interrogating the ways in which texts and parents appear in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. She argues that the novel serves as both a critique of parental neglect and also of parental involvement, in particular the kind of model, modern parental involvement mothers and fathers alike aspire to today. Shuffelton wishes to save parents from a monstrous fantasy, that parents can do it all, do it right, and are responsible for every action and thought of their child. Shelly's text unravels the perils of parenting through isolation, over-protection, and self-abnegation.

Permit me then a few personal confessions on these themes.

Confession 1: While pregnant with my first child, I read Rousseau's *Émile* aloud to her. I scoffed at "parenting" books. Confession 2: Only two weeks after her birth, I was pouring over stacks of the most popular parenting literature I could lay my hands on. Confession 3: After failing to console me during a long-distance phone call, for even my best implementation of the advice of those same books had failed to convince my daughter that sleeping without me was an enjoyable activity, my good and wise mother sent me an electronic book reader. I spent the next year reading every single Jane Austen novel during the wee hours of the night.

Shuffelton, through Shelley, through Victor, through Rousseau, lets

us know that our history of text matters. Books read in childhood and youth by Victor and Frankenstein (the creature) and by Rousseau become figures, in this case, monsters made of text. Reading is not divorced from our selves. The history of what we read reveals shadows and monsters. The history of text thus is as much a part of Shuffelton's argument as it is a potential implication. What happens if we take account of our own histories of literacy—as parents, as educators, as philosophers?

In her book, *One Child Reading*, Margaret Mackey calls this exercise an auto-bibliography—a history of one's literacy development. When I attempted the exercise for myself, I recognized that I could not truly separate my own history of text from becoming a parent. My reading has changed since becoming a mother. Although part of this was necessary, for it was born from a real lack of time, part of this was also my sense that the philosophical texts that had once served me so well now just irritated me when coupled with a sleepless baby, and the certainty that, unlike Socrates, who birthed ideas that he seemed to understand, I had birthed an utter mystery. And yet when I turned towards 'parenting' books, the more I struggled to know about my baby, the more mysterious she became, and the more miserable I felt.

I turn then to confront the textual history in philosophy of education. How does the history of text work in our profession? How would our society of philosophers be different if, for instance, Simone Weil's *Gravity and Grace* was read as a primary text in the field, rather than a text serving to challenge a tradition?

As Shuffelton indicates, the history of text reveals the dangers of learning to read. In particular, reading seems most dangerous when we learn to read from texts that are about the lives of men, in books men wrote, whose purpose is to help us figure out how to become men. Shuffelton thus asks, well perhaps then reading is not so very dangerous for women, since books are not for women? In the great history of text, we are as Simone De Beauvoir puts it, "the second sex," defined only by the fact that we are "not men."²²

Shuffelton's point however is to show that Shelly saw the peril of read-

ing Rousseau seriously as a woman, making the argument that *Émile* is truly a text written for women about learning to be a good woman, wife, and mother. I think back on my auto-bibliography after the birth of my baby, the strange stacks of books about parenting with love, parenting with logic, parenting with limits. The hours I spent online reading blogs about keeping it together, making my own baby food, setting sleep schedules, etc. etc. etc. And all of it geared toward making me always feel that there were never enough things I could do to make this baby happy and good.

Reading is dangerous, but what is most dangerous is thinking that one can read to understand the job of parenting. It is absurd, Shuffelton argues, “to hold parents responsible for every dimension of a child’s experience.” You are not in Victor’s lab, cultivating a tomato plant in a greenhouse, you are raising a human—a being who is to be both known and unknown at the same time, always. Parents are limited and we should be limited; we are not gods. This is where Shuffelton’s argument becomes the most exciting for me because in breaking down the texts of parenting literature, so much indebted to the history of text and science of the Enlightenment and its reasonable, pure souls, she is able to enter into and build on conversation on the philosophy of parenting which, as Stephanie Mackler writes, “better recognizes the humanity of parents and children.”³

I take Shuffelton’s point, but I also want her to unequivocally state that reading Rousseau is so much more dangerous for women—for mothers. This is not because I want to be a victim but only because I wish to take her point seriously. Although fathers now share the burden, paying attention to the gender divide which appears in *Émile* seems an important aspect to consider as we break down the ideals of parenting.

Rousseau’s *Émile* is clearly gender fantastical; its separation between the differences of the two genders and their role in society is not just laughable—it is monstrous. Rousseau’s portrayal of the masculine fantasy of the feminine ideal is clearly present in modern times. I parent and teach in a world where a known sexual predator is the sitting United States President, whose only approach to the presence of violence in our schools is the inappropriate impulse

to arm educators. These are the monsters that appear not just *in* texts but also *out* of texts, the monsters of thinking that are in Shuffelton's words, "patriarchal, punitive, and silencing." Is there a way in which reading can help our daughters face these monsters when they rise out of texts into their worlds? For it seems to be the case that reading (Rousseau in particular) cannot prepare one well for parenting or for challenging overblown toxic masculinity.⁴

I wonder if Shuffelton's key point, that one cannot read in order to parent, should be moved to the very beginning of her essay. Making this point stronger can support her and us all in writing and paying attention to the practices and arts of parenting, building rich conceptual descriptions of being, becoming, and learning to parent.

I believe one such practice that might be articulated is that of reading children's books aloud with children. This seems to be a very different practice than reading on one's own, for information. Children's book author Mem Fox writes of this experience:

As we share ... the hopes and fears and big issues of life that we encounter together in the pages of a book, we connect through minds and hearts with our children and bond closely in a secret society associated with the books we have shared.⁵

If I can place one more confession in front of you today: after each pregnancy and birth, I have been tossed into the dark waves of post-partum depression and anxiety. Holding on in this space has been an overwhelming feat. For as a professional philosopher and woman to write of this experience would be to acknowledge stuff that good women should not write. In her essay "The Professions of Women," Virginia Woolf explains this, telling Shelley and me why writing is so difficult: "Banishing the Angel in the House, the model of purity and domestic bliss was relatively easy, it is the other task, telling the truth as a woman, that is more difficult ..."⁶

Reading between the lines of my confessions is also the truth that to write and read as a woman, perhaps to do philosophy as a woman, is to express and understand the truths that are unwelcome, unholy, and monstrous. I do not

write more of my depression here today, but I can admit that the task of managing it is often made less maddening when I am reading aloud to my children.

Learning to read is difficult for so very many children; it is so very unnatural and complicated for the human brain to master. And as Shuffelton shows us, it opens us up to dangerous texts in a dangerous world. I ask then, should parents, philosophers, and teachers keep teaching children and students to read? My own answer can only be yes.

For though these days I do not often read with my first-born daughter who is a grown-up of age eight, I do still read aloud with her younger sister. And, for my own reading I do quite often pick up works of science fiction written by women that, like Shelley's *Frankenstein*, chill me with their exacting moral questions about progress and human formation. All of this to be sure indicates that, though I find reading as a mother of daughters dangerous, it is most necessary.

1 Maryanne Wolf, *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science Behind the Reading Brain* (New York: Harper, 2007), 3.

2 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 267.

3 Stephanie Mackler, "Raising a Human: An Arendtian Inquiry into Child-Rearing in a Technological Era," in *Philosophy of Education 2017*, ed. Ann Chinnery (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2019): 65–77.

4 My thanks to Cristina Cammarano for her critical reading of inward and outward monsters.

5 Mem Fox, *Reading Magic* (Wilmington: Mariner Books, 2008), 10.

6 Virginia Woolf, "Professions for Women," (1931). Retrieved from <http://s.spachman.tripod.com/Woolf/professions.htm>.