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"'Look More Closely,' Said Mum": Mothers in Anthony Browne's Picture Books

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Abstract In this article, Vanessa Joosen explores Anthony Browne's construction of motherhood in four of his picture books that focus on family. She focuses on the use of narratological perspective, visual point of view, and intertextual references to explain how an ideology of motherhood is evoked. While Browne makes use of child narrators and focalizers whose view of their mothers is limited, some of his picture books contain illustrations that further explore the mother's psyche and move beyond the child's point of view. His construction of motherhood over the years follows rather than sets trends. *Piggybook* offers a rather simplistic role reversal in the heyday of second-wave feminism and *My Mum* conforms to postfeminist new momism. *Zoo* and *The Shape Game* are more artistically complex and open-ended in their possible interpretations of the mother's psyche. In all four books, Browne's mothers, especially in comparison to his fathers, are depicted with more responsibilities: the families rely on the mother's presence and care for their coherence and emotional well-being. The mothers invariably bring a sense of civilization and sophistication to Browne's fictional families.

Keywords Motherhood · Anthony Browne · Picture books · Gender · Ideology · Family stories

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Family stories are numerous in picture books by the celebrated British illustrator, Anthony Browne. While his father figures have received ample attention,[1] less systematically discussed are the mothers in his works, even though they are equally significant for the plot of many of his books and just as diverse as his father figures. In some books, mothers are simply present at home and taken for granted, while often initiating the child characters' adventure by dispatching them to play outside, as in *The Tunnel* (1989), or do an errand, as in *Into the Forest* (2004b). In other works, such as *Piggybook* (1986) and *My Mum* (2005), the story focuses on the relationship between the mother and the rest of the family. "Nowhere is the playfulness of Browne's work more striking than in his representation of gender," writes Clare Bradford (1998, p. 79) on his treatment of masculinity. Does that same playfulness apply to his representations of femininity and fictional mothers?

Whereas Browne has received more endorsement than criticism for his picture books, including the Hans Christian Andersen Medal, some scholars are skeptical about the bourgeois and elitist ideologies that his playful stories and pictures endorse.[2] When it comes to the representation of motherhood, does Browne too affirm approved models and stereotypes? In this article, I explore four family stories featuring human characters, in which the mother plays a significant role: *Piggybook* (1986), *Zoo* (1992), *The Shape Game* (2003), and *My Mum* (2005). Central to my analysis of Browne's construction of motherhood is the use of narratological perspective and visual point of view. In addition, I will explore how intertextual references to his previous picture books reinforce or contradict the ideology of motherhood in his works. While Browne makes use of child narrators and focalizers whose view of their mothers is limited, some of his pictures books contain illustrations that further explore the mother's psyche and move beyond the child's point of view.

New Momism in *My Mum*

Browne's ideological construction of motherhood gains particular relevance when it is connected with the use of the dual and double addressee in his works. As Maria Nikolajeva notes, "The ambivalence of address, based on asymmetrical power position, is inevitable" in children's literature (2005, p. 263). She distinguishes between double address, where the adult author addresses the adult reader "over the child's head, sharing experience at the expense of the child" and dual address, "where the child and the adult co-reader are addressed on the same level, each in

[1] After losing his father as a teenager, Browne has repeatedly testified to the importance of fathers in his picture books (see Eccleshare, 2000; Ferrier, 2011). Critics such as Clare Bradford (1998) have explored masculinity and father figures in his work.

[2] Erica Hateley (2009, p. 325), for example, interprets Browne's references to René Magritte not as a democratization of art, making it accessible for all children, but rather claims that "Browne's ideology of art, its production, and consumption, is not Surrealist but bourgeois and capitalist." Under its tinge of innovation and cultural education, Hateley argues that Browne "privileges 'Art with a capital A' and projects it for and onto children." He thus "establishes a template for consuming approved culture" (2009, p. 332).

their own right" (Nikolajeva, 2005, p. 263). Browne's potential to engage both children and adults is usually linked to the artistic allusions that permeate many of his pictures. Literary critics argue that these are aimed at the informed and often adult reader (as a form of double address), who can interpret the illustrations, or details in them, as intervisual references to famous masterpieces (see, among others, Doonan, 1986; Isaac, 2006). Yet, Browne's construction of motherhood also displays an aspect of adult address (in this case dual address), which is often overlooked: the didactic and ideological messages that his books convey not only to children but also to adult readers. As Elizabeth Bullen and Susan Nichols (2011, p. 218) state on the basis of a research project about children's books in which parent characters read aloud to their children: "Even though the adult may not be the overt addressee of the picture book for preschool children, analysis of double and dual address shows that the address to the parent reflects the prevailing social and cultural beliefs about what they need to know about parenting." Picture books for preschool readers often focus on family relations and become an element that helps to shape social discourse not only about reading but also about parenthood. Especially since Browne makes picture books that are suited for reading aloud, the models of motherhood that he offers reach not only the child reader but also the adult reading along. Some editions of *My Mum* are even marketed with a sticker and card that copies the cover image and carries the added message "Happy Mother's Day," drawing attention to the book itself as a possible Mother's Day gift. In that case, the mother becomes an explicitly intended reader of the book.

Browne's work stretches over several decades, in which ideals of motherhood have been widely debated and have also evolved. *Piggybook* (1986), which will be further discussed below, was published in the heyday of second-wave feminism and describes a mother who disappears because she is tired of being taken for granted in running the household. I will first discuss the more recent *My Mum* (2005) in the light of what Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels (2004, p. 4) have termed the postfeminist "new momism": "the insistence that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children."[3] New momism "both draws from and repudiates feminism" (2004, p. 5), Douglas and Michaels argue, provocatively stating that contemporary mothers "are pulled between two rather powerful and contradictory cultural riptides: Be more doting and self-sacrificing at home than Bambi's mother, yet more achievement-oriented at work than Madeleine Albright" (2004, p. 11). Douglas and Michaels notice a rise in new momism since the 1980s. After first promoting "impossible ideals" of combining motherhood with a successful career (2004, p. 7), it has evolved to become "more hostile to mothers who work, and more insistent that all mothers become ever more closely tethered to their

[3] Douglas and Michaels borrow the term "new momism" from Philip Wylie. In *Generation of Vipers* (2007), he used it derogatively, to criticize overprotective mothers who turned their children "into dysfunctional, sniveling weaklings" (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, p. 5). Douglas and Michaels "seek to reclaim this term, rip it from its misogynistic origins, and apply it to an ideology that has snowballed since the 1980s and seeks to return women to the Stone Age" (2004, p. 5). In contrast to Wylie, they explore the impact of new momism on women rather than children.

kids" (2004, p. 23). Douglas and Michaels thus see postfeminist new momism as a powerful new effort to "redomesticate women" (2004, p. 25). While they mostly focus on politics, legislation, toys, and a variety of media products to evidence the rise of new momism, its influence on the construction of motherhood in recent children's books has been noted by Michele Abate (2013), who casts a critical look on Barbara Park's *MA! There's Nothing to Do Here!*, in which a mother fulfills all her child's needs, even before it is born.[4]

Browne's *My Mum* is presented as a child's laudation of his mother and all her talents, and can easily be interpreted as a normative model for good motherhood. The motto supports this normative impulse: the book is dedicated to a "fantastic mum" (Browne's mother) and a "wonderful mother" (his wife Jane). Douglas and Michaels draw attention to the ideology of motherhood implied in the word "mom": "'Mom'—a term previously used only by children—doesn't have the authority of 'mother,' because it addresses us from a child's point of view" (2004, p. 19). While their point about the authoritative connotations of the word *mother* is certainly arguable, it is clear in this book that the first-person narrator, a child, is addressing the mother in her more cozy demeanor as "mum," a perspective Douglas and Michaels claim is ideologically laden: "'mom' means you're good and nurturing" (2004, p. 20).[5] *My Mum* reinforces the values and many of the stereotypes that Douglas and Michaels identify in new momism. The opening pages of *My Mum* cast the mother in a domestic role, carrying huge bags of groceries, juggling her household tasks, baking a variety of cakes, and gardening—all done with a big smile. The child narrator acknowledges that his mother can be angry (she can "roar like a lion") and that she is tough ("as a rhino"), yet he repeats over and over again that she is nice. This is the message that opens the story, and dominates most of the text and pictures.

When the mother in *My Mum* is described in activities that are not related to the family, the narrative voice changes from a present tense to an *irrealis*, or subjunctive, mode: "My mum could be a dancer, or an astronaut. She could be a film star, or the big boss. But she's MY mum." The tentative mode of the verbs in the first sentence, contrasted with the factual present tense of the last, implies that the protagonist's mother is none of the latter and leaves open whether she actually has a life of her own. A comparison with *My Dad* (2000) is revealing. *My Dad* preceded *My Mum* by five years and is clearly the model on which *My Mum* is based. Numerous textual and visual echoes connect the two books. In *My Dad*, the tense also switches to the *irrealis* at one point, but only to mark one event that is impossible and one that is very unlikely: "He could wrestle with giants, or win the fathers' race on sports day, easily." The comparison suggests that the mother having an interesting job is just as improbable as the existence of giants. Moreover, when the mother in *My Mum* is depicted as a big boss, she is wearing a man's suit, not a woman's. In fact, the mother is wearing the same striped suit and white collared shirt as the father in *Piggybook*, a self-important man who stands in an absolute

[4] Douglas and Michaels as well as Abate are working in an American context, yet most of the television series that they discuss have also been broadcast in Europe, and the phenomenon of "celebrity mom" reinforcing new momist ideals is not unique to the USA either.

[5] The negative implications attached to the word "mother," as opposed to "mom" do not apply to Browne's book, however, as the dedication to his wife makes clear.

contrast to the "really nice" mother lauded in *My Mum*. She is depicted in an oversized armchair that is obviously too big for her, and the slippers that she is wearing and the hearts on her tie and in the background all work together to suggest that her mind is with her family rather than with her professional activities. The image suggests an obvious mismatch between the person and the job. The pink slippers also add a touch of parody to the image of the self-important businessman. Yet like the dressing gown that the mother is shown to wear even when she is dancing ballet or going shopping, it functions more as a marker of domesticity (clothes and shoes you typically wear at home) than as an element of parody.

In *The Rhetoric of Character in Children's Literature*, Nikolajeva warns against an all-too-simple condemnation of gender stereotypes in children's books. At times they must be ascribed to a child's point of view in characters who see their mothers only in caring roles:

> In assessing gender stereotyping in secondary characters, we must be aware of the narrative perspective of the text. In [Astrid Lindgren's] *Karlson on the Roof*, the mother can be very easily perceived as a stereotype, since she is only portrayed in stereotypical situations: baking cinnamon rolls and making hot chocolate drinks for her son, bandaging his wound after a fight, comforting and caring. However, the narrative is focalized through the young protagonist, and the portrait of the mother is *his* image of a perfect parent….Indeed, we do not know what else Midge's mother does beside [sic] baking rolls, since it is irrelevant for the focalizing character. (Nikolajeva, 2002, p. 115)

The repetitive "my mum" in Browne's book indeed stresses the child's perspective in depicting his mother, as well as a recurrent sense of exclusivity and possession. In all the illustrations but the final, the visual perspective from which we see her is also that of the child, either observing his mother or imagining her in various situations. In the penultimate picture, the reader is put literally in the position of the boy, seeing his hands outstretched to hug his mother. Keeping Nikolajeva's remark in mind, it might seem irrelevant to criticize the child-centeredness that is pivotal to new momism in children's books that are so obviously constructed from the child's point of view. However, the child's perspective is always constructed by an adult writer and/or illustrator, as are the characters—including the mother—in a children's story. As it turns out, some young focalizing characters are more broad-minded and observant when describing their mothers than others: *Piggybook* and *The Shape Game*, which will be discussed below, will provide two examples. It should be noted that these two books are for slightly older readers than *My Mum*, which may explain why they give the child more credit for using Theory of Mind (assessing what another person may be thinking) and empathy with the mother's feelings. Yet, not all child focalizers in books for the very young are oblivious to the fact that their mothers have lives beyond the family.[6] Moreover, the child narrator in *My Mum* makes it a hallmark of his dedication that he focuses on several aspects of his

[6] See, among others, Guido Van Genechten's *De wiebelbillenboogie* (2008), in which the mother is too tired to clean up the mess at home after a full day at work, but is cheered up by her dancing children, or Babette Cole's humorous *Mummy Never Told Me* (2003), where the whole narrative revolves around a child imagining the life of her parents in her absence.

mother, trying to capture her in all the positive aspects that he can see. It is then all the more striking that he refers to her mainly in old-fashioned stereotypes. Again, it is revealing to compare *My Mum* to *My Dad*, where a child—perhaps even the same child—is also the focalizing character. For example, the mother is never shown to be in company, whereas the dad is depicted among other people in several pictures: other fathers, a female dancer, two famous singers. Although these characters do not interact in the pictures, the father is not seen in isolation, as is the mother, who is constructed as being dedicated to her child only. The child views his father as a more social being than his mother, and the range of activities and settings in which he places his father is more varied.

In other picture books that are focalized through child characters, Browne has mobilized the illustrations' background to go beyond the child's perspective: details in the background bring to life aspects that the child does not explicitly address—they seem to escape the child's attention. The reader can speculate whether the background elements can be located in the child's subconscious and/or a magic realist, transcendent sphere. Bradford points out how Browne thus uses background images in *Gorilla* (2008), for example, to deconstruct stereotypes of masculinity (1998, p. 83). In comparison to many of his other works, not much happens in the background or in the details in the illustrations from *My Mum*. The main recurrent motif is a red heart, which can be discerned in every single picture. Again, when compared to *My Dad*, where many more background symbols and jokes can be discerned, it is striking that the fictional child's imagination is rather limited when it comes to the aspects that he associates with his mother's personality and inner life.

There is one image which allows for a reading in which *My Mum* questions the idealization of the ever-happy mother that Douglas and Michaels (2004) criticize: the son's observation that his mum is a great painter, combined with an image of the mother applying make-up. On the one hand, it suggests that the child is more creative than his mother, in imagining her simple routine as great art. The humor in the combination of text and picture debases the mother at the same time that it lifts her up: she may be a great painter, but not one that actually produces art. From a feminist point of view, it can thus be read as tragic, because some of this woman's talents may actually go to waste in the limited set of roles she is shown to play. On the other hand, this picture also has the potential to function as a critique of new momism, as it shows the mother while she is looking at herself in the mirror, paying attention to herself, and painting a lipstick smile on an expressionless, even mouthless face. The picture can be read as exposing the constructedness of the idealized mother: happy motherhood seems to become a performance or a mask in this illustration, as something that does not come naturally to this figure, but rather as something that needs to be applied every morning, before the faceless woman becomes the doting mother.

A Mother's Emancipation in *Piggybook*

As already mentioned above, *My Mum* contains a few intervisual references to *Piggybook*, but the latter offers quite a different take on motherhood. *Piggybook* dates back to the mid-1980s, when second-wave feminism had exerted considerable

influence on children's literature. The child's selective view of his mother, which Nikolajeva addressed and pardoned in the quotation above, is exactly the theme of the story, which the book then extends and to which it offers an alternative. The cover shows the mother, Mrs. Piggott, carrying her husband and two sons on her back. All three are broad-faced and smiling, while her face is weary. It is a symbol of female oppression that is hard to mistake. The husband and boys have "very important" jobs and schools to attend, and they boss the mother around. The narrator initially introduces her as "his wife," signaling that the story at first follows Mr. Piggott's perspective. After the general introduction of the characters, a narratological shift takes place that invites readers to reflect on the individuality of a mother who is taken for granted. Before and after Mrs. Piggott goes to work, she is depicted in dreary hues, tending to various domestic chores. The lack of color in the images and the vagueness of her features are symptomatic of her unhappiness and lack of identity in the family.

The story then features a "click moment" that was topical with feminists in the early 1970s: "A 'click moment' was that instant when a woman realizes she's being treated like a doormat" (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, p. 41) and decides to take action. Mrs. Piggot walks away. Her little note—"You are pigs"—can be read as a reference to some feminists of the 1960s and 1970s who criticized "male chauvinist pigs." By all means, the note works magical powers. Her husband and sons actually transform into pigs and the house is no longer a home, but within a mere day turns into a complete pigsty. The mother also has the power to return the pigs to their human form when she comes home. Her departure, therefore, cannot be interpreted as an abandonment of the family, nor is it exclusively motivated by her own needs. She has left to teach the three males a lesson and force them to face their own incompetence. At the end of the story, Mrs. Piggot returns in a business suit, which fits her perfectly, in contrast to the mismatched suit that the mother wears in *My Mum*. The visual perspective switches then to Mrs. Piggot's point of view, casting a shadow on the living room. She is literally and figuratively superior to the downgraded men/pigs, who are scavenging around the room and begging her to come back (Fig. 1). For the first time, the illustrations now show the mother in full color, with a more detailed face, as if she is finally recognized as an individual. The mother is constructed as what holds the family together and a crucial factor in making the men civilized and human again. As Ann Alston claims in *The Family in English Children's Literature*, many recent children's books still conform to the norm that "Home Is Where the Mother Is" (2008, p. 78), so that other family structures are experienced as unsatisfactory and incomplete. *Piggybook* conforms to that trend, displaying the chaos when Mum leaves.

Feminist gender reversals like the one in *Piggybook* work according to a seesaw effect (see Altmann, 1994): in order for the woman to be lifted up, the men must be degraded first. The effect in this family is suggested to be gender equality. After the mother's return, the entire family contributes to the household. The book confirms the conclusion that feminist thinkers of the 1970s found in so-called marriage agreements, where not only was the physical and emotional work divided equally among male and female family members, but also the satisfaction was experienced by both sexes. Such "role reversals strengthened marriages and a father's ties to kids" (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, pp. 43–44). Mr. Piggot and his two sons are

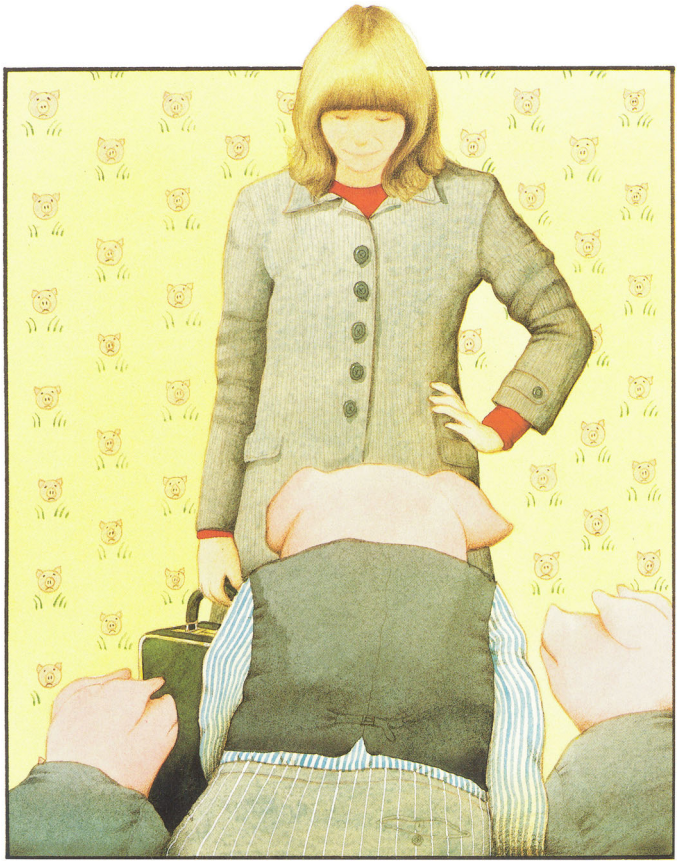

Fig. 1 Illustration from *Piggybook* by Anthony Browne. Copyright © 1986 by Anthony Browne. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, an imprint of Random House Children's Books, a division of Random House LLC. All rights reserved

shown to enjoy the housework, and, regarding their cooking, the text spells out carefully: "Sometimes they even sort of liked it." The hesitation in the phrase suggests that this family only gradually comes loose from typical gendered roles. The story closes with an image of Mrs. Piggot, now seen and described from the perspective of her children. She is no longer called "his wife" or "Mrs. Piggot," but "Mom": "Mom was happy too. She fixed the car." The accompanying picture shows her facing the reader, drawn in bright colors, smiling—in strong contrast with her dreary former self. The happy ending of *Piggybook* thus depends not only on the idea that the mother can now spend her time doing something she enjoys, but also on the fact that the children are more attuned to her needs. The book illustrates, moreover, that a constructed child character's perspective can be extended to include different aspects of a mother's personality.

The ideological gist of *Piggybook* endorses views of equality that were surfacing in many children's books by the 1980s. Bradford argues, "Read ironically, however,

the visual and verbal texts of *Piggybook* can be seen to contest the very possibility of equality in regard to social and domestic roles" (1998, p. 84). The fact that Mrs. Piggot needs to "save her family from squalor and horrible food [is] framed by the gendered associations of the feminine with the domestic" (Bradford, 1998, p. 85). It confirms indeed that the mother's presence is essential for the domestic idyll (see Alston). Even the final pages do not convince Bradford of *Piggybook*'s emancipatory potential. After the excessively detailed pictures that precede them, "the neatness" of the converted men and the simplicity of the text underline for Bradford "the impossibility of their sudden conversion, and by extension, the impossibility of gender equality" (1998, p. 85). Against this interpretation one might argue that the detailed pictures at the beginning of the book, which were loaded with background references to pigs, have been reduced to simplicity because the tension from which the details derived has also disappeared. The blankness of the page then enhances the idea that the new role division releases the characters from this tension and symbolizes their peace of mind. However, as Erica Hateley points out, the rearrangement of household tasks is "leaving Mum free to happily work on mending the car—so inadvertently re-inscribing the belief that it's better to be a dirty boy than a clean girl" (2011, pp. 89–90). Even though that interpretation ignores the textual phrase that the men also (sort of) enjoy their new tasks, it is true that *Piggybook* does not reach further than the simple role reversals that marked early feminist texts for children and that inadvertently served to maintain a dichotomy of the sexes. One can add to this interpretation that the mother is still isolated from the family at the end of the book—she is fixing the car by herself while they are doing the homework—which reinforces the idea that the two sexes operate in different spheres.

The Mother as Comfy Juggler

In all the possible alternative readings of *Piggybook*, one constant remains: the book celebrates the bourgeois idyll of a happy middle-class family, with a clean house and properly cooked meals that Alston describes as being so persistent in children's literature to date. That bourgeois domestic idyll is also held up in *My Mum*. The intervisual allusions to *Piggybook* in *My Mum* encourage a comparison, and as such mark the emancipatory efforts of the earlier book as dated. In *My Mum*, the mother's dressing gown is made of a flowery pattern that resembles the Piggot family's couch, with the added touch of the little red hearts that are the mother's motif. But whereas Mrs. Piggot's critical view of her family turned some of the flowers into pig faces in one of the later images in *Piggybook*, the flowers never change in *My Mum.* In fact, at one point the illustration recasts the mother as an armchair, complete with her slippers, with the text describing her as being as "comfy as an armchair." It is particularly ironic to link this illustration with one of the early pictures in *Piggybook*, where Mr. Piggot is indeed lying very comfortably in the arm chair, watching television, while his wife is doing the dishes, washing the clothes, ironing, and cooking.

In contrast to Mrs. Piggot, the mother in *My Mum* seems to have no problem maintaining all the elements of the bourgeois domestic idyll—the clean house, the

fresh laundry, the home-cooked meals—while also providing armchair-like comfort to her family, or at least, her narrating son does not seem to perceive any problems that she may experience. Indeed, he describes her as a "brilliant juggler." In the picture accompanying this description, she keeps not only two balls but also a purse, a teddy bear, a house, a car, a teapot and an orange up in the air. It can easily be read as a reference to the effortlessly multitasking mother that Douglas and Michaels criticize, with the juggled objects referring literally and metonymically to the house, food, the children, and beauty. When the connection to *Piggybook* is drawn once again—with both books featuring a similar red car—this mother seems even worse off than the pitied Mrs. Piggott. Whereas the latter delegated other household tasks while fixing the car, this mother has to combine it all. When the intertextual comparison is further extended to *My Dad*, the image of the multitasking mother is reinforced. Dad does many things—drinking coffee, eating breakfast, playing football—but not once is he depicted as contributing to the household. From the child's perspective in *My Mum* and *My Dad*, in contrast to the combination of the child's and mother's perspectives in *Piggybook*, that division of household tasks is not problematized at all, since his mother is so good at juggling all household tasks—a very questionable compliment in the light of new momism.

Psychological and Artistic Explorations in *Zoo* and *The Shape Game*

Piggybook and *My Mum* both simplify the mother's actions and her reasoning. Psychologically more complex is *Zoo* (1992). The book describes and depicts a family's outing to the zoo and highlights the mother's empathy with the caged animals that the family observes. In this book, Browne explores the mother's mindset more extensively through the use of metaphors, analogies, and visual symbols. In contrast to the mother in *My Mum*, this mother hardly ever smiles, and her gaze is more directed toward the animals than toward her children. Her empathy with the animals is expressed both textually and visually. "Poor thing," the mother says about the caged tiger, her attitude contrasting with her two sons' boredom and her husband's corny jokes about animals, which indicate their indifference to the animals' position. Later, during the ride home, the mother remarks: "I don't think the zoo really is for animals.… I think it's for people." This comment implies that zoos do not protect animals but rather display them for the enjoyment of people. It also draws attention to the switch of perspectives that happens in the illustrations, in which the humans and animals alternate between being spectators and spectated.

As in *Piggybook*, awareness of perspectives is central to this picture book. The text follows the eldest son's perspective, but the images regularly depart from it, with highly symbolic implications. For example, when Browne shifts the visual perspective from the observing humans to the caged animals, the mother is depicted as being behind bars. She appears to be the only person who is really looking at the animals, and seems to be as entrapped as they are. Like the mother in *Piggybook*, her enigmatic facial features and the colors in which she is drawn distinguish her from the rest of the family. But whereas *Piggybook* revolves around a click moment, the mother in *Zoo* seems resigned and does not take action. She is devoid of anger

and has rather adopted an ironic stance: when the boys are fighting, the mother says about the baboons that "They remind me of someone.… I can't think of who." In the following illustration, the reader gets to see the baboons from the mother's perspective. While the boys are fighting, their gazes are turned to each other rather than to the animals. Browne's image of the baboons contains an implied critique that converges with the point that the mother explicitly makes later in the book. The baboons live in a cage filled with concrete and brick walls and an iron fence. A single green leaf highlights the contrast with what should be their natural environment. The baboons themselves turn away from the spectator, except for one, who growls in anger. The reader is invited to share the mother's perspective that a zoo mistreats animals by taking them from their natural habitat.

While the mother can still see some humor in the situation at that point in the story, comparing her sons to baboons, the next illustration shows her decidedly sad and worried when witnessing an orangutan who hides in a corner. His long black hair is reminiscent of hers. It is up to the reader to determine whether the mother's sadness, her suggested feeling of entrapment, and her sense of detachment relate mainly to the visit to the zoo or whether she experiences a more general feeling of discomfort with her role in the family.

Although *Zoo* depicts a mother who cares for her children—she is, for example, more attentive than their father to the fact that they are hungry—her mind is also suggested to be on other things. In the course of the story, the first-person narrator seems to be oblivious to his mother's perspective on the zoo. The illustrations never show him looking at her, and his expression is often in contrast with hers. The text confirms that the I-narrator is mostly caught up in fights with his brother, food, and gifts, and finds the animals boring rather than pathetic. At the end of the book, however, he dreams about being caged like an animal and wonders if animals can dream too. The mother's empathy with the animals has affected and influenced him, after all, and he is able to look beyond his own needs and interests, speculating with empathy about how other beings might feel.

The Shape Game (2003) establishes a contrast to *Zoo* in several ways. The story features the same family with mother, father, and two sons, now on a trip to the Tate Gallery in London. The two texts are connected through various intervisual links. In *Zoo* the story is told in the first person by the eldest brother (George), while in *The Shape Game* the youngest boy (Harry) is the narrator. As in *Zoo*, the illustrations are drawn from a slightly different point of view than the text, often showing the family as a whole and including aspects of the narrator that he does not see (or at least describe) himself (a change in color, for example). Harry is established as a more sensitive observer than his brother—in fact, the story opens with an image of the adult Harry illustrating the story, and thus constructs his younger self as an artist in the making. The book regularly stresses the importance of point of view in what you see, encouraging the reader to adopt the same attentive attitude.

It is especially the mother who is entirely transformed in comparison to her representation in *Zoo*. In *The Shape Game*, she initiates the trip and leads the family: "It was my mother's idea—that year for her birthday she wanted us all to go somewhere different. It turned out to be a day that changed my life forever," the

opening reads.[7] Whereas in *Zoo*, the mother's influence on the narrator only becomes clear at the end, when George ends up sympathizing with the animals after all, in *The Shape Game*, it is acknowledged from the beginning. In the former book, the mother is disturbed by the caged animals and refuses to be a willing spectator, but in Tate Britain she is depicted as feeling truly at home. Thus, both visits have an impact on the I-narrators that aligns them with the mother's view.

As in *Piggybook*, Browne's use of colors in *The Shape Game* suggests how much at ease characters are in a situation. Whereas in *Zoo*, the mother's clothes are more dreary than the rest of the family's, in *The Shape Game* they become increasingly colorful, as do the younger son's, while George and the father remain illustrated in faded, gloomy shades, visually evoking their unease and boredom, for a longer while. The youngest son, as I-narrator, is the first to catch the mother's enthusiasm for art and receive a bit more brightness. Whereas in *Zoo*, nobody ever looks at the mother, in *The Shape Game*, one of the first illustrations depicts the youngest son following her and the subsequent picture shows him looking at her and holding her hand. Her presence is acknowledged from the start. When the mother starts explaining the paintings to the rest of the family, everyone gets engaged and consequently colored in too.

The mother in this book functions as an art critic for both her family and the reader. She is shown to be aware of art history, encourages the children to establish a personal connection with the artworks, and teaches them to look for symbolic clues in works such as Augustus Egg's *Past and Present No. 1* and John Everett Millais's *The Boyhood of Raleigh*. The first picture in particular is reminiscent of the symbolism of imprisonment in *Zoo*, a link that the reader is spurred to explore when the mother asks, "Does it remind you of a family we know?" Together they work out, for example, that the bracelets of the fallen woman in the painting look like handcuffs and that the mirror opens "a door showing that the mother will have to leave the home." The symbols of imprisonment resonate with the mother's depiction in *Zoo*. However, in *The Shape Game* the mother's remark does not lead the children to draw the link with their own lives, possibly because they cannot imagine their mother as a fallen woman. Moreover, whereas they were depicted as a "broken" family in *Zoo*, in terms of psychological rather than physical distance or adultery, it is suggested that they are more of a unit in *The Shape Game* and that is largely due to the mother's efforts.

The next painting in the Tate Gallery that is shown, *The Cholmondeley Ladies*, features two women holding a baby, once again dealing with motherhood. The narrator's mother is shown in a position where she is catching her son's interest and pointing out details. Together with the accompanying text, it can be read as a metafictive comment on how to read Browne's own books: "'Those two are just the same,' I said. 'Well, not exactly,' said Mum. 'Look more closely.'" By creating similarity as well as subtle difference, just as in the painting depicting *The Cholmondeley Ladies*, Browne invites the reader to do the same with *Zoo* and *The Shape Game*. The advice that the mother gives is a reading strategy that is fit for all

[7] The accompanying image shows an illustrator who differs significantly from Browne himself and seems to discourage an all too obvious autobiographical interpretation (although Browne did establish in interviews that the story was based on his childhood experiences).

of Browne's works, and especially for those that are intertextually connected. With the following painting, John Singleton Copley's *The Death of Major Peirson*, she spurs her children to empathy and even identification with a family fleeing war: "Can you imagine that really happening in our street?" The final family picture in *The Shape Game*, which depicts them all walking and playing together, suggests that the mother has not only raised their interest in art but has also managed to increase their coherence and love for each other. Compared to *My Mum* and *Zoo*, Browne constructs in *The Shape Game* a child's point of view that is attentive to various aspects of the mother's character and casts her as an intelligent, knowledgeable, creative, and caring person. Although she thus functions as a role model, she is at the same time exempt from new momism: she is constructed as a character that combines authority (through her knowledge) with a caring attitude (visually expressed in the loving way she physically interacts with her son), but the story does not suggest that she is "ever more closely tethered to [her] kids," to refer back to Douglas and Michaels. In contrast to *Piggybook* and *My Mum*, *Zoo* and *The Shape Game* only give snapshots from a day in the family's life, so that they avoid the question of the work/life balance and the constant focus on the child's well-being that is central to new momism.

Conclusion

A comparison of the four family stories above yields a varied picture when it comes to Anthony Browne's construction of motherhood. The playfulness that Bradford discusses for his construction of fatherhood and masculinity certainly applies to the mothers in some of his works (for example, *My Mum*), but not to the same degree. Browne's mothers, especially in comparison to his fathers, are depicted with more responsibilities: the families rely on the mother's presence and care for their coherence and emotional well-being. There is always a sense of respect for the mother, and in none of Browne's books are the mothers ridiculed and parodied the way the fathers are. The mother brings a sense of civilization and sophistication to the family. In *Zoo*, for example, the father's failed jokes are contrasted with the mother's use of irony—a more subtle and complex form of humor. The central roles that mothers and fathers play in the four books that I have discussed open up different subject positions with which adult readers or co-readers (when reading aloud) may choose to identify themselves, or which they may reject and criticize, depending on their personal views of parenthood and their concepts of a good children's book. In Browne's work, potential contradictions between the adult characters and the implied adult addressee (as co-reader) emerge more in his father figures than in his mother figures. The Dad in *Zoo* and *The Shape Game*, for example, is characterized by his lack of empathy and patience—whereas reading aloud to a child does presuppose a parent's wish to engage with the child for a longer time. The mother figures, in contrast, all display the qualities expected of a parent who reads aloud: although there are clear differences, the four mothers are constructed as loving, empathic, and interested in spending quality time with their children, even if some demand space for themselves.

Browne's construction of motherhood over the years follows rather than sets trends. *Piggybook* offers a role reversal in the heyday of the emancipation movement that can be argued to be liberating, yet simplistic; and with *My Mum* the child's perspective is mobilized to give an image of the all-giving mother who conforms to postfeminist new momism. Both emerge from an ostensibly well-meant respect for motherhood that can, however, be deconstructed to have the opposite effect and reinforce gender stereotypes. *Zoo* and *The Shape Game* are more psychologically and artistically complex, subtle, and open-ended in their possible interpretations. *Zoo* draws attention to the mother's reservations and potential psychological struggles without spelling them out entirely. *The Shape Game* invites readers—explicitly and implicitly—to look more closely and extend their point of view to see further than what immediately meets the eye. This is also the book in which Browne constructs a child's point of view that is attentive to details beyond its own direct interest and in which the image of the mother that results from this point of view is the most nuanced of all his books. In showing and not just telling about a mother's inspiration, while at the same paying respect to her qualities beyond caring for the family, it is a more fitting contemporary tribute to motherhood than *My Mum*.

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