IU’s Lilly Library Collection Exhibited in England

Jane Johnson manuscript nursery library provides insights into 18th-century instructional materials

What was interactive home schooling like before the invasion of television and computers, say in 18th-century England? A collection of Lilly Library materials exhibited in the Octagon Gallery of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, England, helps provide an answer to that question.

The exhibition, “Handmade Readings: An Eighteenth-Century Mother’s Nursery Library,” was installed by Elizabeth Johnson, the head of technical services at the Lilly Library on the Bloomington campus, and was on display from April 4 to May 21, 1995. It featured the Jane Johnson manuscript Nursery Library, consisting of 438 pieces of instructional materials made by Jane Johnson (1708-1759) for her four children. “The Jane Johnson Manuscript Nursery Library is a unique collection,” Elizabeth Johnson says. “It gives us insight into how a mother in the 18th century might have prepared instructional materials to teach her children to read.”

The materials, part of the Lilly Library’s Elisabeth Ball collection of historical children’s materials, consist primarily of cards. Some, like flashcards, review single letters or words. Others, however, are much more elaborate, with short stories, biblical passages, and poems. “Jane Johnson was a writer, a poet,” Johnson says. “She had a good sense of teaching literacy. She knew how to start simple and how to incorporate children’s experiences into her teaching.”

The materials have moral instruction built into them. “Like most materials of that time for children, there was a generous amount of moral education,” Johnson points out. “It was very much a part of the period.” Although there is no other such collection in existence, Elizabeth Johnson believes that home schooling by mothers was a common practice in 18th-century England. “Jane Johnson was more artistic and creative than others,” she says. “But I think many mothers worked in the home to teach their children to read.”

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The exhibition also includes 12 18th-century children’s educational books that may have influenced Jane Johnson’s work. “These books are examples of the types of materials commercially available, and of the educational theories that were prevalent at that time,” Johnson says. One book in particular, Isaac Watt’s Divine Songs, was one of the most influential popular works for children, and Jane Johnson is sure to have known it.

Both the exhibition and a concurrent conference entitled Scrapbooks and Chapbooks: Reading, Writing, and Childhood, 1700-1850, also held in Cambridge, were funded by a grant to the Lilly Library from the George and Frances Ball Foundation of Muncie, Indiana.