

# Marianne Moore, Her Family, and Their Language<sup>1</sup>

LINDA LEAVELL

Associate Professor of English  
Oklahoma State University

SCOTCH-IRISH AND CLANNISH the Moores called themselves. It was a family of profuse words and inauspicious marriages. So intense was the mutual devotion of the three—the poet, her mother, and brother—that it bewildered and sometimes incensed outsiders. William Carlos Williams, one of the most ardent of Moore’s literary admirers and considered by some to be half in love with her, complained that her adoration of her brother and “pathological” devotion to her mother prevented her from marrying any “literary guys.” Her genius, he guessed, came from her father, who was “never mentioned”—“maybe skipped, maybe dead.”<sup>2</sup> What might have surprised Williams is the extent to which the Moore threesome itself constituted a literary community, one that Moore often preferred to that of the “literary guys” he had in mind.

Marianne Moore never knew her father. Educated as an engineer but unable to find employment, he suffered a mental collapse a few months before her birth in 1887. His wife, Mary, took their infant son, Warner, to her own father’s home in Kirkwood, Missouri, a prosperous suburb of St. Louis. Marianne was born in the Presbyterian manse there, next door to the church where her grandfather, the Reverend John Warner, had served as pastor for twenty years. Mary and her husband were never reconciled. For the next six years, she and her adored father sought solace in the young children. “And what is the *home*,”

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<sup>2</sup>William Carlos Williams to Ronald Lane Latimer, 20 December 1934, quoted in Paul Mariani, *William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked* (New York: Norton, 1981), 394.



FIGURE 1. John Warner Moore, Mary Warner Moore, and Marianne Moore. Photograph by Guerin, St. Louis, ca. 1891. Courtesy of the Rosenbach Museum & Library.

she asked, “but a nest, where the young are cherished, & where the old again grow young, beholding childish joy?”<sup>3</sup>

Concepts of childhood changed rapidly during the nineteenth century, and Mary reared her children under assumptions different from

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Warner Moore to Anne Warner Armstrong, 25 August 1893, Rosenbach Museum & Library, Philadelphia (hereafter RML).

those under which she herself was reared. She subscribed to a Victorian understanding of childhood that was, according to some scholars, “one of the most important inventions of the industrial era.”<sup>4</sup> As in Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality,” children were seen as conduits of spirituality, and their innocence required protection against the corrupting influence of industrialization. Perhaps the thing that most distinguished the new concept of childhood was play. Before the nineteenth century, children were valued for their ability to work. But as public sympathy moved to exclude children from the industrial workforce, play came to be seen as a necessary stage of the maturing process.

Mary, an only child, encouraged her children to play and fantasize and reinforced their devotion to one another. The following incident, which she recorded just after Marianne’s sixth birthday, reveals much about the early dynamics of the brother/sister relationship: “One day Warner & she were playing they were birds: now robins, then thrushes, & again ‘chippies’: when Warner said ‘When I’m a chippy, *you* have to be a *frush!*’ ‘O no Buddie,’ she replied in a dear little coaxing voice—‘*You know we are just almost the same*; and when you are a chippy, I *have* to be a chippy too; & when you are a fwush, I have to be a fwush!’”<sup>5</sup>

They never outgrew this game. Until they were in their eighties, Marianne and Warner called each other by animal names and invoked a private vocabulary that largely drew on the baby-talk of their Kirkwood years: “vey” for “very,” “kam” for “calm,” “chippy” for “sparrow.” Although their animal personae changed over the years, the one constant past childhood was Marianne’s insistence that she be Warner’s *brother* and hence “he” in the family language—perhaps so that she and Warner would be “just almost the same.”

As Warner and Marianne entered adulthood in the new century, Mary’s attachment to the concept of childhood became central to her moral and religious vision. She often advised Marianne in college to “be a little child again” and wrote to Warner as a young man, “Remember how well Peter Pan flew, till he began to consider the manner of his flying. Oh! don’t be introspective! We are bidden to be like little children that we may enter the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>6</sup> All three adult Moores read children’s books and shared them with one another. Most notably, in 1914 they read Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows*

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Kline, “The Making of Children’s Culture,” *The Children’s Culture Reader*, ed. Henry Jenkins (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 96.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Warner Moore to Anne Warner Armstrong, 24 November 1893, RML.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Warner Moore to Marianne Moore, 14 January 1907; Mary Warner Moore to John Warner Moore, 17 March 1909, RML.

and adopted its woodland personae for themselves. Mary was the home-loving Mole; Warner, the distinguished Badger; and Marianne, Rat, the scribbler of verses.

The death of John Warner in 1894 marked the end of the time when the Moores could take comfort and plenty for granted. Although he left a small estate, Mary felt keenly the loss of her father's financial as well as his emotional protection. She took the children first to live with cousins near Pittsburgh and then moved to Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where the Moores made their home for the next twenty years. For fourteen of those years Mary supplemented her inheritance by teaching English at a private girls' school.

The closeness of the Moore family was no accident on Mary's part. Her own mother had died when she was an infant, and she spent a lonely childhood with her paternal grandparents. Her father's devotion to his parents and siblings impressed her deeply. "How they did *talk* when they got together!" she recalled. "And no one could say they made religion dull. The walls rang with laughter—jokes—satires—anecdotes—sermons. Bible passages discussed; and then their prayers together night and morning!" It was this vision of home, the "love and intensity of feeling and enjoyment in one another's presence,"<sup>7</sup> that she sought to create when she moved her children to Carlisle. She justified that vision on racial grounds—"the clannish feeling of the Scotch, their almost idolatrous family love"—and on religious ones. "Don't forget that we three are 'a peculiar people,'" she repeatedly told her children, "that is, acc. to the Scriptures, a people *set apart*. We have a mission to the world; as the old prophets used to call their message, '*a burden*.'"<sup>8</sup>

Marianne grew into a shy adolescent who had little use for companions other than "her pugnacious and vivacious brother," as Mary depicted him in 1902. "He has scarcely whistled himself into the house, and banged the front door shut, till he has demanded her whereabouts; and immediately they are off together on some jaunt or project."<sup>9</sup> They rode bicycles, played tennis, and made up a cast of characters that they liked to impersonate in teasing, competitive games with one another. Their mother had little part in these games until Warner left home for Yale in 1904.

For much of Mary's own childhood, letters from her father had been her sole conduit of parental love, and now she had to rely on letters again to keep her family intact. She wrote and expected in return two to three long letters each week. She feared the secular influences

<sup>7</sup> Mary Warner Moore to John Warner Moore, 26 October 1919, RML.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Warner Moore to John Warner Moore, 27 February 1910 and 19 October 1905, RML.

<sup>9</sup> Mary Warner Moore to Mary Craig Shoemaker, 2 July 1902, RML.



FIGURE 2. Marianne Moore and John Warner Moore. Photograph by Choate, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, ca. 1898. Courtesy of the Rosenbach Museum & Library.

of college life. “O I wish I wish you were not out on the wild wild sea of ‘this generation!’” she wrote Warner, and she tried to impress upon him the family’s distinctiveness as a “peculiar people”: “It’s hard to resist those, who are our compeers and friends in everything save this *inner life*. But it has to be done, unless we become one of them; and that, surely, is too dear a price to pay.”<sup>10</sup> Nothing threatened Mary’s

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<sup>10</sup> Mary Warner Moore to John Warner Moore, 17 and 20 October 1904, RML.

vision of family like Warner's interest in girls. He was a tall, handsome, engaging young man who enjoyed the company of women throughout his life. When Mary learned in Warner's first semester that he had exchanged a few letters with a young woman, she made him promise to send home any such letters received in the future and not to answer them without her approval.

Language was never a trivial matter to the Moores, and Mary, the English teacher, applied the same zeal to rectifying Warner's occasional usage and spelling errors that she applied to his social life. She also expected his letters to be frequent and vivid enough for her to feel his presence. If Warner and Marianne learned from their mother the power of precise diction and detail to make their letters vivid, she learned equally important lessons as they initiated her into their own language.

The family letters exchanged during Warner's freshman year demonstrate a contest not just of wills, but of styles. At first Mary addressed her letters sentimentally "Dear Child," but by the spring she had changed to "Dear My Uncle Biter." Within the family mythology Marianne and Warner were bachelor brothers who had adopted an orphan fawn, their mother. Warner was Biter, a turtle, and Marianne was Fangs, a 'gator. Hence, Mary addressed them as "Uncle Biter" and "Uncle Fangs." For Marianne's benefit, Warner's letters home included much teasing about turtles and 'gators. When Marianne began a letter "My dear Biter" instead of the accustomed "Dear Biter," Warner responded that the change was "highly opprobrious" to him: "For that alone, you deserve a most fearful buffet on the snout. Leer not, isolent *lizzard*, thinking that although you deserve said buffet, you'll escape it, on account of the distance between us. I coming home soon. So, it behooves you to repent in 'burlap and thistles.'"<sup>11</sup>

Mary did not attempt to correct Warner's English here. The special language allowed him to resist and even parody her solicitousness and yet at the same time to convey intimacy and affection. The names Mary continued to use most often—Toady and Sissy—were almost never used by Warner and Marianne, and they sometimes teased her for misusing their special words. "I greatly regret having taught the Fawn to say 'Camel Brand of turkey Figs,'" wrote Marianne, "for now when I ask her what she's to call Uncle, or something else, she promptly jabbers out the Fig phrase regardless of the order in which the words

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<sup>11</sup> John Warner Moore to Mary Warner Moore and Marianne Moore, 12 February 1905, RML.

come.”<sup>12</sup> But Mary learned to tease, too: “When I want to torment Uncle, I call him ‘Aunt Fangs.’”<sup>13</sup>

All three Moores contributed over the decades to the evolution of their private language. To Warner, it served to fill the pages that his mother demanded, to maintain the bonds of affection that were genuinely dear to him, and to keep those bonds at a certain distance from the rest of his life. Also indicative of that distance is his decision in college to have his friends call him John, his first name, rather than Warner, his middle name and his mother’s maiden name. For Mary, the special language maintained the family’s innocence—she was the one most likely to interject childhood expressions—and to reinforce their distinctiveness as a “peculiar people.” “If we had not the remarkable family life,” she once wrote, “even to a vocabulary that amounts to a foreign language, we should not be awkward with our friends, & unnatural; but we are like people interrupted in love-making the minute any outside persons come in.”<sup>14</sup>

As the youngest and thus in the position of least authority, Marianne nevertheless had the freedom and savvy to align herself with power. While only occasionally did she join Mary in chiding Warner, she never rose to his defense. On the other hand, she reveled in the privilege of being Warner’s “brother” and in the reversals this permitted, as when she told her mother, “if you had a family, you might go home, but as you’re an orphan fawn I’m obliged to keep you, and do for you.”<sup>15</sup> Although the bonds of familial affection were just as important to Marianne as to the others and although she could rise readily to the challenge of verbal sparring with Warner, she did not often initiate such games. She preferred to play with the allusiveness of the language. As with “Camel Brand of turkey Figs,” she enjoyed challenging the others to grasp the meaning. The more obscure the allusion, the more intimacy was required to interpret it.

Marianne left home for college in 1905. Her four years at Bryn Mawr were the only time in the first six decades of her life that she lived apart from her mother. In addition to benefiting from Bryn Mawr’s progressive curriculum, she saw plays in Philadelphia by Ibsen and Shaw, read Henry and William James, and was introduced to the poetry of Browning and Yeats. In her sophomore year she began writing for the student literary magazine. After graduation she returned to

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<sup>12</sup> Marianne Moore to John Warner Moore, 1 May 1905, RML.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Warner Moore to John Warner Moore, 20 April 1905, RML.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Warner Moore to John Warner Moore, 31 March 1911, RML.

<sup>15</sup> Reported in Mary Warner Moore to John Warner Moore, 7 November 1904, RML.



FIGURE 3. Marianne Moore and Mary Warner Moore. Photograph by Arthur Steiner, New York, 1938. Courtesy of the Rosenbach Museum & Library.

Carlisle and continued her literary apprenticeship, reading avidly and writing poems.

In 1915 she discovered, and was discovered by, the avant-garde literary magazines then flourishing in London, Chicago, and New York. In December of that year she visited Alfred Stieglitz's 291 gallery in New York and met various members of the avant-garde. By the time

she moved to Greenwich Village with her mother three years later, she was regarded as one of the most radical and accomplished poets in her circle, a transatlantic circle that included Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams. Her cryptic poems and brilliant conversation “held every man in awe.”<sup>16</sup> But those who had gravitated to the Village as much for its sexual freedoms as for its artistic ones were dumbfounded by her domestic arrangements. Though a few of Marianne’s literary associates recognized Mary Warner Moore for the intelligent, literate woman she was, she epitomized for most of them the pious, genteel certitudes of the nineteenth century, everything that they sought to overthrow. Alyse Gregory called her an “*appalling* Mamma.” Williams called her “a terrific pain in the neck.”<sup>17</sup>

Warner’s marriage to Constance Eustis in 1918 and his decision to pursue a career as a navy chaplain precipitated his mother and sister’s move to New York. Despite Constance’s Wellesley education, affluent family, and spirited personality, Mary could not help but regard the marriage as a betrayal, as she had, in fact, regarded all of Warner’s romantic attachments for the past fifteen years. Over the ensuing decades, both of Warner’s families made efforts to be loving toward one another, but they could never dispel an underlying distrust, much of which focused on the family’s special language. Although Warner used pet names with his wife and four children and encouraged them to call his mother Mole and his sister Rat, he never allowed Constance or the children to participate fully in the language he shared with Mary and Marianne. Even apart from the nicknames, he was John to his wife and Warner to his mother and sister. He hid from Constance almost all of the many letters he received from Mary and Marianne, and after his mother’s death even kept a secret post office box for his sister’s letters. More than any other aspect of Warner’s deception, the special language incited Constance’s jealousy. She understood as well as he did the power of that language to maintain intimacy across the miles and years and also its power of exclusion.

“No other poets in the family,” Warner once told an interviewer, “although my sister and I exchange letters and each one seems like a poem to us.”<sup>18</sup> Although the language in these letters is often indecipherable to outsiders, all three Moores exhibit a remarkable verbal felicity.

<sup>16</sup> Alfred Kreyborg, *Troubadour: An Autobiography* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1925), 239.

<sup>17</sup> Alyse Gregory to Scofield Thayer, 8–9 October 1921, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Conn.; Williams to Latimer, 394.

<sup>18</sup> John Warner Moore, quoted in Eileen Foley, “Genius at Work: ‘I Write Because I Can’t Help It,’” *The [Philadelphia] Evening Bulletin*, 26 October 1965, clipping in RML.

Some of Moore's readers, however, find the references to 'gators, turtles, and orphan fawns not only confusing but embarrassing; they would empathize with the refusal of Warner's adolescent children to address their aunt as Rat. Likewise, many readers regard Mary Warner Moore as an "appalling Mamma." In the biography I am writing, I hope to provide a fuller portrait of Moore's family than has been available and to show how the complexity of their relationships contributed to her art. It is not hard to see how Mary's emphasis on precise diction and vivid detail is manifest in her daughter's poetry nor to recognize there Warner's playful resistance to sentimentality. In 1920 Warner observed that his sister's poems are in "our own special 'language' but so marvelously handled that the 'aliens' could & can understand them."<sup>19</sup> But many of Moore's poems, and especially those of the late teens and early twenties, were enigmatic enough to baffle her own mother. Mary pronounced her daughter's first book a "veiled Moham-medan woman."<sup>20</sup> The contrast between Moore's avant-garde poetry and her puritanical lifestyle has been often observed. Even more intriguing is how she managed to live an almost child-like existence with her mother while carving out in her poetry, as Warner did with his wife and children, a place of autonomy and resistance.

<sup>19</sup> John Warner Moore to Mary Warner Moore and Marianne Moore, 1 May 1920, RML.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Marianne Moore to Hilda Doolittle, 26 July 1921, carbon, RML.

