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Rethinking Nineteenth-Century Childhood

The Mind of the Child: Child Development in Literature, Science and Medicine, 1840-1900. Sally Shuttleworth. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010. 497 pp.

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<1> In *The Mind of the Child*, Sally Shuttleworth observes that while there are numerous social histories of childhood in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the prevailing assumption has been that the field of child psychology begins with Freud. The premise driving her impressive book is that this assumption problematically foreshortens our historical understanding of the study of children's mental development—an insight whose value is immediately evident. Shuttleworth is masterful at bringing together the wide-ranging voices that predate Freud to reveal trajectories of complex discussion that comprise more than a century of investigation into the developing mind. Despite the dates given in the book's subtitle, she stretches with facility back into eighteenth-century notions of child development and easily discusses examples from the earliest decades of the twentieth century.

<2> Shuttleworth effectively rewrites the history of scholarly and medical interest in the topic of child mental development, demonstrating the tremendous range of fields that contributed to the increasingly scientific study of children's minds and giving overviews of emerging periodicals and key publications in these various fields. She notes that the Victorians themselves understood child-study as evolving through many diverse avenues simultaneously. In keeping with this sentiment, she marshals a potentially bewildering array of examples—from fields as disparate as fiction, journalism, anthropology, evolutionary theory, photography and illustration, advice manuals on child-rearing, autobiography, popular cultural beliefs, and medical inquiry, including physiology, psychology and psychiatry—into a carefully organized and accessible format of eighteen relatively short chapters. Each chapter focuses on a specific issue, sometimes exploring scientific questions—such as the psychological or physiological origins of night terrors—and at other points offering extended analysis of literary texts that influenced particular theories. Chapters end with summaries of key arguments, which place them within the larger trajectory of the book, a particularly helpful feature given that Shuttleworth is invested in demonstrating how the scientific ideas under discussion developed both synchronically and diachronically.

<3> One of Shuttleworth's most intriguing observations is that nineteenth-century scientific studies of the child mind were heavily influenced by the examples of children in fiction. Today

one might assume that the influence flows only in the other direction—that scientific understanding of the mind shapes novelistic portrayals of characters in the mode of psychological realism. Yet Shuttleworth demonstrates how, for the Victorians, although science crept into fiction, astute novelists as often provided detailed portraits of developing intellects which directly aided doctors in formulating their theories about what constituted normal processes of mental growth and what factors might influence those processes for good or ill. Shuttleworth writes, "Literary texts played a definitive role, opening up initially the internal spaces of the child mind, suggesting hitherto unsuspected depths of emotions and thought, and then responding to, qualifying, and questioning scientific and medical theories. Literary texts did not simply supply material for medical case studies . . . they also helped frame the questions and categories of an emerging scientific field" (362). *The Mind of the Child* adroitly reads literary texts through the science of their moments (e.g. *Jude the Obscure* [1895] in terms of theories of child depression and suicide) as well as the reverse; Shuttleworth demonstrates how fin de siècle studies, for example, drew heavily on mid-century portrayals of children by George Eliot and Charles Dickens.

<4> For clarity, *The Mind of the Child* is divided into four parts that are roughly chronological: "Early Child Psychiatry and the Literary Imagination," "Systematic Education," "Post-Darwinian Childhood: Sexuality and Animality" and "Childhood at the *Fin de Siècle*." While these parts move generally forward in time, Shuttleworth is more explicitly interested in tracing the multiple angles from which nineteenth-century figures approached questions of children's mental development, which did not necessarily advance in neatly chronological ways. In practical terms, this strategy means that while there are chapters containing analyses of specific works of fiction, in the main, texts and authors come up at multiple points throughout the book. Because one of her aims is to create a sense of circulating discourses, this method draws together particulars from scores of disparate texts around key issues to sometimes-brilliant effect. For example, to make a single point about contrasting notions of the relationship between education and sexuality, she deploys William Acton (psychologist, author of the much-reprinted *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs, in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age, and Advanced Life* [1857]), T.S. Clouston (psychiatrist focusing on questions of puberty and reproduction), Juliana Ewing (writer and editor of domestic fiction), Sarah Grand (reformer, New-Woman author), and Henry Maudsley (psychiatrist representing a view of children as predisposed for negative behaviors). While readers less familiar with the key players may find the complex matrix of voices initially overwhelming, ultimately Shuttleworth dexterously weaves together the myriad threads contributing to the discussion of child development.

<5> Throughout, Shuttleworth privileges tracing out scientific debates rather than implying resolutions to them. She mentions, for example, that "whilst Acton argued, with reference to male sexuality, that it was your 'puny exotic' or intellectually precocious child who suffered most from sexual precocity, Grand, like Ewing, offers a different model of energy dynamics: lack of development in the intellectual area encourages sensuality to flourish" (211-12). She earlier notes that Herbert Spencer (sociologist, educational and political theorist) was not alone in arguing that "educational over-pressure was doubly injurious to girls since it diverted energy from the proper development of the reproductive system" (132). As is invariably the case when discussing so many texts over the course of a single book, similar questions—here, how education shapes sexual development—arise in more than one chapter. Hence a reader might

wonder whether there was consensus about *why* over-education leads boys towards masturbation and other forms of precocious sexuality, while it leads girls towards infertility. Were nineteenth-century thinkers convinced that this was an intrinsic, gendered difference in response to educational pressure? Or is this a reflection of anxieties over girls' sexual development being considered in any terms other than the reproductive? Or is it merely a difference of opinion about the results of over-education that is not necessarily gendered at all—that some scientists were convinced that too much attention to books at the expense of physical activity would drive children towards early physical expressions of sexuality, while others were convinced that too much attention to a life of the mind would deplete resources needed to develop the body in healthy ways? While Shuttleworth might have offered more guidance about how these multiple voices fit together, the ambitious nature of her book is invigorating in its capacity to generate questions a reader will want to pursue.

<6> Shuttleworth is clear from the outset that her focus on the child-study movement limits her discussion to middle- and upper-class children because they were the primary subjects of nineteenth-century study. "Forced to work from an early age, the working classes," she notes, "were not deemed to inhabit the same sphere of childhood as the middle classes, where childhood meant an extended period lived explicitly apart from the adult world" (9). Despite this caveat, she interweaves attention to the working classes at multiple points. In her reading of *Dombey and Son* (1846-48), she observes that Dickens's criticism of the "brain forcing" system of education is linked to a larger social critique that forcing produces similarly stunted fruit in arenas such as industrial "progress" where gains are enabled by a labor force that occupies industrial slums. Subsequently, she explores why both the medical establishment and teachers' unions were deeply concerned about the passage of the Foster Education Act (1870) and ensuing laws on compulsory attendance: that the working-class child, by gaining access to the privilege of education once reserved for its "betters," might soon be suffering equally from educational over-pressure.

<7> Shuttleworth takes on an impressively wide range of topics in child-study and draws fascinating and often unexpected connections between them. In "Monkeys and Children," she explores the post-Darwinian celebration of boyhood as "a form of existence lying outside the bounds of civilization" (246), in which a kind of lovable naughtiness was "prized above that of sly or dishonest theft amidst the working classes or the immoral activities of the savage" (252). In developing this chapter, Shuttleworth looks not only at discourses of evolution and colonial notions of "savage" peoples but also at the display of primates in traveling shows, at popular articles by naturalists and zoologists on monkey care, and at the trend of keeping monkeys as pets. In the process, she ties together scientific discussions of educational over-pressure with the role of evolutionary theory in understanding child-study, even inviting a reader to reconsider Romantic ideas of childhood innocence, as she demonstrates that cultural notions of children's maturation processes were undergoing profound shifts.

<8> Articulating the forces variously considered most central to child development, Shuttleworth presents theories that pinpoint maternal tensions during pregnancy, scary tales told by servants, ineffective parenting, the inheritability of mental disease, insufficient physical exercise, cramming and educational stress, and the notion that children are "creatures of original sin [or]

victims of their own passions which had to be curbed and controlled if they were to emerge successfully into adult life" (89). *The Mind of the Child* discusses both *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) as novels that treat passion as a virtue rather than a problem. A parallel inquiry into children's emotional independence from adults arises as she investigates Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* (1897): "At a time when fiction for children was increasingly focusing on a world where children could exist in a realm of their own imagination, free from adult restraint, James suggests through his novel that children are utterly defined by the adults who frame their lives" (326). Through her sustained close readings of these disparate examples, Shuttleworth articulates the evolution of adult notions of children's capacity to feel deeply and imagine widely—in short, to have minds of their own.

<9> The capacity of Shuttleworth's book to orchestrate a tremendous range of ideas about child development is perhaps its most valuable asset. In addition to the topics mentioned above, she investigates debates about children's lies (morally reprehensible? evidence of linguistic immaturity? a reflection of the trajectory of human history? a sign of imaginative power?); appropriateness of mothers observing their own children and reporting their findings for scientific purposes; connections between children and "savage" societies; criminality; pathologies of childhood; and differences between nineteenth-century psychologists' and psychiatrists' visions of child development. Her facility with sources not only models interdisciplinary study on a grand scale, but also insists that such study is vital to understanding nineteenth-century science, which itself emerged through heavy dependence on voices from myriad disciplines. In the end, *The Mind of the Child* prompts us to rethink our own assumptions about the history of childhood by revealing that the complexity of nineteenth-century discussions of child development is as layered and rich as is an actual human mind.