



the MIND of *the* CHILD

*Child Development in
Literature, Science, and
Medicine, 1840–1900*



SALLY SHUTTLEWORTH

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MEDICINE, 1840-1900

BY
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THE MIND OF THE CHILD

What is the difference between a lie and a fantasy, when the subject is a child? Moving between literary and scientific texts, Sally Shuttleworth explores a range of fascinating issues that emerge when the inner world of the child becomes, for the first time, the explicit focus of literary and medical attention. Starting in the 1840s, which saw the publication of explorations of child development by Bronte and Dickens, as well as some of the first psychiatric studies of childhood, this groundbreaking book progresses through post-Darwinian considerations of the child's relations to the animal kingdom, to chart the rise of the Child Study Movement of the 1890s.

Based on in-depth interdisciplinary research, *The Mind of the Child* offers detailed readings of novels by Dickens, Meredith, James, Hardy, and others, as well as the first overview of the early histories of child psychology and psychiatry. Initial chapters cover issues such as fears and night terrors, imaginary lands, and the precocious child, while later ones look at ideas of child sexuality and adolescence and the relationship between child and monkey. Experiments on babies, the first baby shows, and domestic monkey keeping also feature.

Many of our current concerns with reference to childhood are shown to have their parallels in the Victorian age: from the pressures of school examinations, or the problems of adolescence, through to the disturbing issue of child suicide. Childhood, from this period, took on new importance as holding the key to the adult mind.

For my parents, Barbara and Kenneth Shuttleworth, and
my daughters, Becky and Katy

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This is an 'old-fashioned' book in a fairly literal sense. It has been fashioned out of months spent working on dusty, crumbling tomes, in ill-lit basements all over the UK. Such uncomfortable, though deeply satisfying, research will

no doubt very shortly become a thing of the past. I note, as I make my final revisions, that many of the periodicals I worked on are now available online. References that took weeks of toil can now be unearthed at the click of a button. My thanks are due to staff at innumerable libraries, but particularly the British Library at Boston Spa, where I was allowed into the stacks, the Leeds Library, and the Bodleian Library and in particular Wilma Minty.

I have completed *The Mind of the Child* in the year my youngest child turned 18—I can but hope it did not consume too much of my daughters' childhood. Despite the best of intentions I never completed baby or child diaries, and I offer this book to my daughters, Becky and Katy, as a very pale substitute. I note in the text the contrasting meanings of the term 'child'. Whilst one can leave childhood behind, one always remains the child of one's parents. This book is also dedicated to my parents, in gratitude for their unstinting love and support. Finally, I wish to thank John Christie for his emotional and practical support, stern critical eye, and intellectual companionship.

In constructing the book I have drawn on various earlier published versions of material. An overview of the project appeared as 'The Psychology of Childhood in Victorian Literature and Medicine' in Helen Small and Trudi Tate (eds.), *Literature, Science, Psychoanalysis, 1830–1970: Essays in Honour of Gillian Beer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 86–101. Versions of material in Chapters 2, 11, 15, and 18 appeared in Anne-Julia Zwierlein (ed.), *Unmapped Countries: Biological Visions in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture* (London: Anthem Press, 2005), 193–206; Geoffrey Cantor et al. (eds.), *Science in the Nineteenth-Century Periodical: Reading the Magazine of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 199–215; *Comparative Critical Studies*, 2/2: *Invention: Literature and Science* (2005), 143–63; Phillip Mallett (ed.), *Thomas Hardy: Texts and Contexts* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 133–55.

List of Abbreviations

ODNB	The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography
OED	Oxford English Dictionary

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Introduction

We live in an age fascinated by childhood. Newspaper articles and television programmes debate on an almost daily basis the importance of early training, whilst 'early childhood studies' flourish in university education departments, and 'babylabs' have become an essential component of any Experimental Psychology programme. Such academic interest is an index of more broadly based social concerns. Fear of the feral child, as a threatening, animalistic presence, is counterbalanced by an equally deep-seated fear that we are depriving our children of a proper childhood.¹ Childhood, we are repeatedly told, is 'disappearing', whether through the pressures created by our examination and educational systems, the emergence of the sexualized child, or the loss of imaginative play.² Such claims are generally delivered with a sense of shock, as if the perception were entirely new. They probably tell us more about our cultural investment in certain ideals of childhood than the actual social position. In this work I trace some of the prior history of these intellectual and cultural concerns in the literature and sciences of childhood of the Victorian age. Worries about exam pressures, child sexuality, or the feral child are all to be found there. Victorian attitudes to childhood have too frequently been associated in the popular mind with the old adage 'Children should be seen and not heard', suggesting a repressive, restrictive culture that had no interest in the inner world of the child. The actual story is both more intriguing and more complex. Far from exiling the child to a metaphorical dark corner, the Victorians opened up the child mind to literary, scientific, and medical scrutiny. Although Romantic writers had established a cult of the child, it was the Victorians who created the first detailed literary and scientific studies of child development. In the process they established the frameworks of our current understanding, posing many of the questions that still trouble us today.

The Mind of the Child examines the complex interplay between the literary and the scientific domains as writers and experimenters sought to

define and explore the baffling territory of the child psyche. It focuses on a period in England, between 1840 and 1900, when the inner workings of the child mind became for the first time an explicit object of study across the cultural and disciplinary spectrum, from novels and autobiographies to psychiatric case studies. This was an era which witnessed the rise of child psychology as a discipline, and the first detailed analyses of nervous disorders and insanity in childhood. It also saw the publication of all those powerful novels of child development by Dickens, the Brontës, and Eliot which opened up for the reading public the inner thoughts and feelings of childhood, helping to define both for the Victorians and our own culture what it means to be a child. The sense of powerlessness, and of fierce injustice, experienced by Jane Eyre or Maggie Tulliver, for example, still resonate with us today. Whilst there had been innumerable educational treatises from the late eighteenth century onwards focusing on how to teach a child, and factory reformers had campaigned for changes to the physical conditions of the working-class child, it is not until the mid-nineteenth century that we find detailed attention paid to the processes of mental development in childhood. In part this shift can be explained by changing social structures, with the rise of the middle classes, and by increasing levels of education, opening up new social spaces and stretches of time in which to be a child. The emergence, from the late eighteenth century, of the historical sciences, and concomitant modes of understanding natural and social forms as outcomes of processes of historical development, also shifted attitudes to the child.³ No longer just a stage to be passed through before being launched into life, childhood became the key to understanding the adult form, a crucial time which laid the foundations for the future. As Wordsworth noted in 1807, 'The Child is Father of the Man': it was a perception which was to guide the literature and sciences of childhood in the Victorian age.

This study begins with the 1840s, which saw an extraordinary flowering of the literature of child development, as well as the first steps towards establishing the child mind as an area of medical investigation: the first journal of medical psychology, the *Journal of Psychological Medicine and Mental Pathology*, was established in 1848, whilst the same period saw the publication of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* (1847), *Dombey and Son* (1848), and *David Copperfield* (1850), as well as various autobiographical accounts of early childhood memories.⁴ In the following pages I chart the interrelations of these various forms of exploration and the changing models of childhood

which emerged over the next few decades, until the turn of the century, the point at which histories of child psychology or child psychiatry normally begin. By looking in detail at medical and psychological texts which have hitherto received very little academic attention, and by placing them in a wider cultural context, the study will offer a significantly revised history of the emergence of child psychiatry and psychology. It will also illuminate the processes by which new fields of science come into being.

In cultural and psychoanalytic accounts of childhood, the dominance of Freudian theory has tended to create a revolutionary, or originary, moment around 1900 which has obscured earlier work in the field.⁵ Freud's observation, in particular, that no previous author had recognized the existence of the sexual instinct in childhood has largely been taken at face value.⁶ If we take the emerging medical psychiatry of childhood of the preceding decades into account, however, a far more interesting picture begins to emerge. The Victorian child is not only sexualized but prone to numerous nervous disorders. Our current concerns about child sexuality, or nervous breakdowns in the face of educational pressures, are prefigured in this era.⁷ Although nineteenth-century psychiatric texts frequently drew on literary works as case studies, the few historical studies we have of early child psychiatry have tended to be narrowly focused, neglecting the broader cultural context.⁸ Similarly, studies of the figure of the child in nineteenth-century literature have been more prone to draw on Freudian analysis as an interpretative tool than to place both Freud and literary representations in a shared cultural and scientific frame of understanding.⁹ By drawing them together in this study I hope to gain a deeper, more complex understanding of nineteenth-century constructions of the child mind.

The relations between the different disciplinary fields with reference to childhood are by no means straightforward. It is certainly not the case that literary texts simply drew on emerging scientific theories. Indeed, the reverse can be shown to be true, with key literary works playing a formative role in the development of the frameworks of nineteenth-century child psychiatry. As I will show in the first chapter, one of the first textbooks in child psychiatry drew its diagnostic categories from a literary text. Nor did different areas of study emerge at the same pace; rapid developments in one field were met by relative silences in another. Very different images of the child mind also began to emerge; there was no unanimity, no single Victorian construction of the inner child. Psychology and psychiatry, for

example, produced from the same biological principles highly discrepant models of the child: naive innocent, living in a world of wonder and mythological fancy, or animalistic product of a savage past. Pre-existing religious and cultural models of childhood are transposed, with a new twist, into the terms of an emerging science. Rather than viewing the literary, cultural, and scientific projections of childhood as different disciplines, it makes sense to see them as mutually constitutive fields, drawing upon each other in various ways in constructing their developing models of childhood.

Following the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) there were marked shifts in constructions of childhood as forms of evolutionary psychology and psychiatry began to emerge. The long-standing popular notion that the child is like an animal or savage was given apparent scientific validation in theories of recapitulation, in which the child was seen to mirror in its early years ancestral forms of the species, both human and animal. Similarly, within the emerging field of anthropology, women, children, and savages were repeatedly linked together as figures who stood outside the unstated norms of white middle-class masculinity. The figure of the child, I would suggest, lies at the heart of nineteenth-century discourses of gender, race, and selfhood: a figure who is by turns animal, savage, or female, but who is located not in the distant colonies, nor in the mists of evolutionary time, but at the very centre of English domestic life.¹⁰

During the second half of the nineteenth century the child became the focus of unprecedented observation, analysis, and speculation, culminating in the final decade in the foundation of a child study movement which brought together psychologists, educators, writers, and parents in dedicated study of the developing mind of the child. At issue were many of the same concerns that animate such studies today, language acquisition, the emergence of a sense of self, or the workings of imagination, but generally underpinned by a desire to find in the child evidence of primitive or animal ancestry. Such studies gave rise to numerous autobiographies and fictional accounts of childhood but also fed into the work of those two giants of twentieth-century child study—Freud and Piaget—both of whom were influenced by theories of recapitulation.¹¹ Our current frameworks of understanding have their roots firmly in the nineteenth century.

To understand why the child mind became an object of such fascination in the nineteenth century, it is necessary to turn first to the eighteenth, to a period when emerging structures of middle-class family life were creating new social spaces for childhood and the writings of

Rousseau laid the foundations for Romantic conceptions of the child.¹² In his Preface to *Émile, ou de l'Éducation* (1762), Rousseau announced sweepingly that 'We know nothing of childhood'. Earlier writers had focused on what a child ought to learn, without regard to its capabilities: 'They are always looking for the man in the child, without considering what he is before he becomes a man.'¹³ Rousseau opened up the question of what it means to be a child, although it should be noted that the perspective throughout the text is decidedly not that of the child itself but the tutor.¹⁴ Where earlier generations had sought to enhance and accelerate the processes whereby a child could acquire the knowledge and understanding required to enter adulthood, Rousseau sought, if anything, to retard development, to ensure that a child remained a child as long as 'nature' dictated. Rousseau's child is a child of nature in two senses: he is to be brought up in the countryside, away from corruptions induced by the accelerated forms of learning created by social and city living, but he is also to be raised according to the laws of development laid down by nature: 'Nature would have them children before they are men.' 'Childhood', he announces, 'has its own ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling... and I should no more expect judgment in a ten-year-old child than I should expect him to be five feet high.'¹⁵ In the late nineteenth century, members of the child study movement spent many hours of intense observation trying to outline the precise forms of these ways of 'seeing, thinking, and feeling'. Rousseau's primary interest, however, lay not in such details but in defining childhood as a space and time that was not adult. His childhood is a peculiarly empty space. The mind, he argues, 'should be left undisturbed until its faculties have developed'. The child should not be treated as if it is a creature of reason, and should certainly not be introduced to reading, which is 'the curse of childhood', before age 12, and preferably not before 15.¹⁶ Although Rousseau, despite his protestations of originality, drew extensively on Locke's hugely influential study *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1692), he parts company from him here in his insistence that the child must be kept away from books and formal education.

Childhood for Rousseau is a time that stretches until around the age of 20, during which period the child will be kept sequestered from society, so that his 'desires may be kept in ignorance and his senses pure'.¹⁷ Rousseau's child is not intrinsically pure and innocent; he is kept so only by rigid control. *Émile* is a text containing many contradictions, and not surprisingly gave rise

to numerous conflicting interpretations, not least because of the paradox at the heart of the work whereby the freedom of this ‘natural’ child is only produced by intensive parental labour and control. Rousseau expanded both the time to be occupied by childhood, and the responsibilities of the parent, who now has a duty to maintain the child in the requisite state of natural childhood.

Despite being banned on publication, and the obvious impossibility of fulfilling many of the prescriptions, Rousseau’s work nonetheless had a major impact on theories of child rearing and education, both on the Continent and in England. It has been calculated that around 200 treatises on pedagogy were published in England between 1762 and 1800, most showing, in one form or another, the influence of Rousseau.¹⁸ There were even attempts to raise children of nature, as in Richard Lovell Edgeworth’s lamentable failure with his oldest son, who ended up both unloved and uncontrollable, and Thomas Day’s more disturbing attempt to raise two girls from foundling hospitals as potential marriage partners for himself.¹⁹ More successful were the educational texts produced by Edgeworth, *Practical Education* (1798, co-written with his daughter Maria), and Day, *Sandford and Merton* (1783), which took from Rousseau the idea of learning from nature, and focused on observation and experiment.²⁰ Edgeworth based his work partly on ‘registers’ of the educational development of his own younger children, which he had initially developed around 1776 and Maria later maintained, setting a model for those earnest observers of children who were to follow a century later.

Such rational models of education were a source of despair to Wordsworth, who created in Book V of *The Prelude* his vision of ‘the monster birth / Engendered by these too industrious times’, who is ‘no child, / But a dwarf man’, a prodigy surrounded by his telescopes, crucibles, and maps, whose ‘deep experiments’ cause country folk to tremble: ‘All things are put to question; he must live / Knowing that he grows wiser every day / Or else not live at all.’²¹ His portrait of the driven child of rational education is set immediately before his own version of the natural child, the Boy of Winander (first published separately in *Lyrical Ballads*, 1800). Where the child of Day and the Edgeworths is guided, prompted and answered by its educational mentor, the Boy of Winander puts his question to nature in the form of an owl’s cry, and is answered not by an adult voice but by nature’s echo, transforming his hoot into ‘mirth and jocund din’ (V, l. 404). The Wordsworthian child is, in Judith Plotz’s phrase, a ‘sequestered child’,