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Candid Lying and Precocious Storytelling in Victorian Literature and Psychology

I. Precocious Children in the Victorian Period

Victorian literature and Victorian psychology seem, superficially, to contradict each other on the subject of precocious children. In literature, precocious children embody virtue; in psychology they anticipate insanity. However, Sally Shuttleworth has observed that the two discourses are comparable insofar as they show ‘very little concern with the effects [of precocity] on the children themselves’.¹ The overview of the scientific study of precocity offered at the end of the Victorian period by psychologist Leonard Guthrie illustrates the prevalent attitude in medicine. Guthrie’s writing becomes particularly forceful when he summarises the adult prospects of formerly precocious children:

They develop every form of hysteria and neurasthenia. They spend their lives in seeking patent cures for exhaustion bred by passion, and shriek and rail against an inappreciative world. They sometimes end in monomania or perhaps in lunacy or suicide – or they swell the roll of cranks and faddists who burn to reform something and to punish somebody, and usually end in extinguishing themselves.²

In Guthrie’s view, precocity anticipates, if it does not generate, adult insanity. His primary concern is not the effect of precocity on the child, but the possible consequences of precocity for the adult.

The range of disorders here associated with precocity reflects the broad and even ‘evil’ significance it had accrued by the end of the nineteenth century.³ The frequent use of the word ‘precocious’ to mean ‘sexually precocious’ in much medical literature of the nineteenth century is consistent with the etymology of the word.⁴ However, by the time of Guthrie’s lectures sexual precocity is only one expression of what is more generally defined

¹ Sally Shuttleworth, *The Mind of the Child: Child Development in Literature, Science and Medicine, 1840-1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 150. ~~No ampersands please: and rather than & throughout~~

² Leonard Guthrie, *Contributions to the Study of Precocity in Children and the History of Neurology* (London: Eric G. Millar, 1921), p. 62. The material published here was originally presented to The Royal College of Physicians as part of The Fitzpatrick Lectures on the History of Medicine, in 1907-1908.

³ Guthrie, p. 3.

⁴ The first definition and earliest use of ‘precocious’ are in reference to plants which have flowered early (‘precocious’ in *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 2016) <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 24 August 2016]).

as the early manifestation of attributes or abilities considered ‘adult’.⁵ By the end of the Victorian period, precocity was more nebulous, and consequently more sinister, than its earlier, specifically sexual significance implied.

When Claudia Nelson argues that many precocious children in nineteenth-century literature ‘hint at adult culpability in not providing the middle-class child with an upbringing that shields him or her from the contradictions and difficulties of the world’, and ‘also suggest the adult’s own helplessness’, she similarly identifies that the disquiet about precocity evident in much nineteenth-century literature is founded less in fears about childhood sexuality than in the indictment of adulthood which precocity so often offers.⁶ Paul Dombey of Charles Dickens’s *Dombey and Son* (1848) is illustrative: expected to become ‘part of his [father’s] own greatness’, Paul becomes a precocious reflection of that father, and thus anticipates not only his own failure to attain adult ‘greatness’, but the failure of the father who has required this precocity of him.⁷ Paul’s death is causally connected with his father’s disgrace, and both are anticipated in the ‘strange, old-fashioned, thoughtful’ precocity with which Paul is characterized throughout.⁸

The child in the opening chapters of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) might seem to be Paul Dombey’s opposite. Jane is not a cipher for adult ambition; her precocity is, instead, figured in the ‘unchildlike look and voice’ with which she protests against a world which often confuses and even angers her.⁹ However, the adult Jane is clearly performed, and thus, implicitly, formed, by this precocious child.¹⁰ In *Dombey and Son*, precocity is an indictment of the adult it reflects; in *Jane Eyre*, precocity is a vindication of the adult it

⁵ Working class precocity continued to be conflated with sexual precocity throughout the Victorian period. See Deborah Gorham, ‘The “Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon” Re-examined: Child Prostitution and the Idea of Childhood in Late-Victorian England’, *Victorian Studies* 21.3 (1978), 353-79, for an analysis of the assumptions about class which informed this discourse.

⁶ Claudia Nelson, *Precocious Children and Childish Adults: Age Inversion in Victorian Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), p. 40.

⁷ Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ed. by Alan Horsman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 97.

⁸ Dickens, p. 98.

⁹ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. by Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 251. **Full title please**

¹⁰ The same could be said of the precocious protagonists of Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Dickens’s *David Copperfield* (1850) and *Great Expectations* (1861), and George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). The child protagonist of Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* (1836-7), by contrast, neither anticipates adulthood through any precocious knowledge, nor attains adulthood within the text. Oliver is instead a study of childhood innocence, and is therefore an ‘innocent and unoffending child’ at the end of the novel, as he is at the start (*Oliver Twist*, ed. by Kathleen Tillotson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 401. **Are the protags of VF children ever (in the text)? Or am I missing the point? (Also, are all child protags in canonical fiction precocious? Would a counter example of a non-precocious child protag clarify the distinction?)**

anticipates. One way or another, the adult is thus of determining significance in these literary studies of childhood precocity, as it is in medical studies such as Guthrie's.

The culture of child study exemplified by such texts proliferated in the late nineteenth century, and coincided with what Peter Bowler has called the non-Darwinian revolution. As Bowler has shown, 'Darwin converted the scientific world to evolutionism, but not to Darwinian evolutionism'.¹¹ Despite Darwin's argument that the mechanism of evolution - natural selection - is non-teleological, the evolution of the species was still understood by many in terms of 'progressionism, with the human race as its inevitable goal' until the early twentieth century.¹²

It was the 'belief that the growth of the embryo provides the best model for the history of life' - the idea that the development of the individual recapitulated the development of the race - which particularly supported this conceptualisation of evolution.¹³ According to Bowler, the analogy between growth and evolution on which the developmental model was predicated 'was non-Darwinian in character because it encouraged the belief that evolution shares the progressive and teleological character of individual growth', but ontogeny can only recapitulate a teleological phylogeny if childhood is conceived as a primitive stage in the progress towards adulthood as a goal and end-point.¹⁴ The child as the origin of growth, and the adult as the end to this teleological process, constituted evidence for as well as metaphorical exemplification of progressive models of evolution in the late nineteenth century. Bowler's overview of non-Darwinian evolution reveals the underlying dependence of the developmental model on a concept of the child as a narratable origin to a stable end.

Shuttleworth has identified children's literature as '[a]nother piece of the picture we need to set in place' in an analysis of childhood in the nineteenth century.¹⁵ The prolonged popularity of one classic of children's literature, Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess* (1905), reflects the fascination with precocity characteristic of the era. Its precocious child-protagonist first appeared in the children's magazine *St. Nicholas*, in the serial 'Sara Crewe; or What Happened at Miss Minchin's', published during 1885. This series was revised and expanded for the stage and first performed, as *The Little Princess*, in 1902, and, at the

¹¹ Peter Bowler, *The Non-Darwinian Revolution: Reinterpreting a Historical Myth* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. 47.

¹² Bowler, p. 74.

¹³ Bowler, pp. 74-5.

¹⁴ Bowler, p. 51.

¹⁵ Sally Shuttleworth, 'Victorian Childhood', *Journal of Victorian Culture* 9.1 (2004), 107-113 (p. 111).

invitation of Burnett's publishers, expanded again into the enduringly popular full-length novel.¹⁶

Sara's precocity engages with Victorian ideas about precocious children in both psychology and literature. Sara is both a condemnation of her father's childishness, like the precocious children Nelson describes, and a response to the perceived diagnostic significance of precocity in contemporary psychology. However, *A Little Princess* is primarily concerned with issues which, as Shuttleworth observes, receive less attention in psychology and in canonical or more literary fiction: this novel is not about the precocious child as a study of adulthood, but about the precocious child as a subject in itself.

Marah Gubar argues that '[t]o be disturbed by precocity ... indicates one's commitment to the idea that there ought to be a strict dividing line separating child from adult'.¹⁷ By comparing *A Little Princess* with contemporary child psychology, and with an ostensibly satirical essay on precocity written by leading child psychologist James Sully, I will argue that the lack of concern for the child herself, which characterizes the latter texts, registers the threat that the precocious child embodies to the adult either represented in, or responsible for – as author of – those texts.

More particularly, Sara's specifically linguistic precocity obviates the supposed moral difference between truth and lies, and therefore undermines the difference between adults' language and children's language which the former polarity upheld in psychological studies of precociously articulate children. However, because *A Little Princess* is interested in the child herself, rather than in the adult reflected or anticipated by her precocity, such disruption becomes a vindication both of Sara and of story-telling. John Kucich has argued that truth-telling became a trope for 'ethical incoherence' in the late-Victorian period; in *A Little Princess*, the precociously articulate child becomes an assertion of the ethical potential of lies instead.¹⁸ By advocating the transgression of the line dividing deceit and truth, *A Little Princess* transgresses the line between child and adult. This text therefore challenges the idea of the child as an embodiment of growth, and the adult as the end to this teleological process. In doing so, it problematizes the ideal of progress which this developmental story was meant to uphold.

¹⁶ See Marian E. Brown, 'Three Versions of *A Little Princess*: How the Story Developed', *Children's Literature in Education* 19.4 (1988), 199-210, on the differences and similarities between the three versions.

¹⁷ Marah Gubar, *Artful Dodgers: Reconceiving the Golden Age of Children's Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 3.

¹⁸ John Kucich, *The Power of Lies: Transgression in Victorian Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 201.

From the start of *A Little Princess*, Sara Crewe and her father disrupt any clear boundary between adult and child. Sara is introduced through her capacity to be the equal, even the guardian, of her father:

[t]o keep the house for her father; to ride with him and sit at the head of his table when he had dinner-parties; to talk to him and read his books – that would be what she would like most in the world.¹⁹

Language clearly contributes to this inversion of the parent-child relationship. Not only does Sara read her father's books; she 'was [...] always inventing stories of beautiful things, and telling them to herself. Sometimes she had told them to her father, and he had liked them as much as she did' (p. 10). It is specifically through her precocious aptitude for language that Sara can, as Deborah Druley has observed, mother her father.²⁰

The relationship between Sara and Captain Crewe is also inverted in the terms through which each is depicted. While Sara is described as 'old-fashioned' three times in the opening chapter, her father is 'a rash, innocent young man' with a 'boyish expression' (p. 7, p. 10, p. 18, p. 15, p. 17). Such characterization is, of course, inseparable from the novel's plot. By portraying Captain Crewe as innocent, *A Little Princess* anticipates the plot of his corruption, and by characterizing his daughter as precociously maternal, it foreshadows the role she might play in his salvation.

Such a role is typical of precocious children in the literature of the Victorian period. For Frank Kermode, '[o]f an agent there is nothing to be said except that he performs a function'; of precocious Victorian children there is often little to be said but that they are agents of adult redemption.²¹ In Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), for example, Little Nell represents the capabilities and responsibilities of the precocious child as a standard of moral purity.²² The same themes recur at the *fin de siècle*; in, for example, Henry James's 'The Author of Beltraffio' (1884) and *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) Dolcino and Miles

¹⁹ Burnett, *A Little Princess* (London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1996), p. 9-10. Subsequent page numbers will be cited in-text.

²⁰ Deborah Druley, 'The Changing Mothering Roles in *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, *A Little Princess*, and *The Secret Garden*,' in *In the Garden: Essays in Honour of Frances Hodgson Burnett*, ed. by Angelica Shirley Carpenter (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2006), 51-65 (p. 55).

²¹ Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 98.

²² See Helen Small, *The Long Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 187-98 on the relationship between youth and age in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Amy Dorrit of *Little Dorrit* (1857) and Jenny Wren of *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) offer two more Dickensian variations on this theme.

represent ideals to the adults ostensibly responsible for them. Moral and powerful children might also be considered a hallmark of Burnett's fiction for children, much of which likewise represents the precocious child as a profound force for good in a degraded adult world.

James Sully's 'A Learned Infant' (1887) is a satirical comment on two principles underlying the ideas about childhood promoted by such fiction. Firstly, Sully is clearly impatient with the idea that the precocious child has such power at all. Thus, he recounts how, in consequence of spectacularly precocious familiarity with the Bible, 'the all-wise infant', Christian Heineken, can offer his mother 'a consolatory quotation or two' from it to overcome her 'natural dislike to the idea of [the] sea-voyage' he has decided to take.²³ Similarly, 'when he saw the crew dejected by a protracted storm, he manned them to new efforts by consolatory quotations from their vernacular Scriptures' (p. 54). The precocious child's abilities are remarkable not in themselves but for their (ludicrous) effect on the adults around him.

However, such power is not only laughable. As Sully notes, 'to one who feels the potent charm of childish talent, the future of the little hero is a matter of indifference' (p. 48). Indeed, 'the lustre of childish talent needs not the addition of the more diffused and vulgar splendour of adult fame' (p. 48). Since precocity is important only in its effect, and has its most potent effect if it is not 'diffused' in adulthood, Sully claims that '[w]hat we want is a chronicle of a great child who died before there was time to think of a later career, and who is therefore plainly immortalised in virtue of his young achievements' (p. 49). Despite the sarcasm of this remark, it is corroborated in many literary texts of the Victorian period. George Gissing's observation that Nell's 'one safe refuge [is] in the grave' could also be applied to James's Dolcino and Miles, who are both 'immortalised' in death to safeguard the ideals they represent.²⁴

In a context in which (if only implicitly and fictionally) the future of the precocious child was 'a matter of indifference' when compared with the effect of childish talent on adults, it is ominous that, early in *A Little Princess*, Sara's father enters into a speculation on diamond mines which promises 'such wealth as it made one dizzy to think of', '[i]f all went

²³ Sully, 'A Learned Infant,' *The Cornhill Magazine* 8.43 (1887), 48-60 (p.54). Subsequent page numbers will be cited in-text. Christian is the subject of a German text, 'Life, Deeds, Travels, and Death of a Very Wise and Very Nicely Behaved Four-Year-Old Child, Christian Heinrich Heineken', which was written by Christian's tutor, Christian von Schöneich and published in 1779. Sully discusses this text because it is, he claims, one of a 'very small' number of 'perfect tributes to the genius of childhood' (p. 49). Guthrie mentions the same child – referred to as Christian Hemerken – in his discussion of the connection between precocity and early death (Guthrie, p. 44).

²⁴ George Gissing, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* (London: Gresham, 1904), p. 211.

as was confidently anticipated' (p. 60). The 'if' conditioning Captain Crewe's expectation holds the promise of its disappointment. Inevitably, he is soon 'overweighted by the business connected with the diamond mines', and turns for help to his precocious daughter: "'You see, little Sara," he wrote, "your daddy is not a business man at all [...] If my little missus were here, I dare say she would give me some solemn, good advice"' (p. 69). In keeping with Nelson's analysis, Sara's precocity testifies to Captain Crewe's culpability because it is demanded of her by the situation in which she is placed by his irresponsibility, and also testifies to his helplessness because it is so sharply contrasted with his own 'boyish' innocence. In keeping with the function of the precocious child as 'agent' in contemporaneous fiction, Sara's sacrificial death should be imminent.

However, as Kermode suggests, 'when the agent becomes a kind of person, all is changed'.²⁵ The possibility that Sara is the agent of her father's redemption is represented in *A Little Princess* only in order to be dismissed. Captain Crewe 'died delirious, raving about his little girl – and didn't leave a penny' (p. 82). The 'jerky brusqueness' of the style in which his death announced is replicated in the narrative itself and is not only indicative of the treatment Sara will receive at Miss Minchin's hands as a result, but implies that for the narrator Captain Crewe is more to be blamed than pitied for leaving his daughter to fend, adult-like, for herself (p. 81). Sara's apparent function is changed by her father's death but, because the novel is focalized through her – because in contrast with so many studies of childhood precocity, *A Little Princess* is about childhood itself, and thus because Sara is, in Kermode's terms, a person, not an agent – this death is not entirely unsatisfactory.

II. Precocity and Lies

Sara's now-superfluous capacity to be her father's moral guide is, as I have demonstrated, evident particularly in her power to tell stories. Captain Crewe's death constitutes a response to the function of such precocity in contemporary literature. If, as Roderick McGillis argues, '[t]he power to tell a story is the power, to a certain extent, to fashion the self and the self's world' in *A Little Princess*, her father's death indicates that Sara's story-telling abilities will instead serve her own needs.²⁶

²⁵ Kermode, p. 98.

²⁶ Roderick McGillis, *A Little Princess: Gender and Empire* (New York: Twayne, 1996), p. 70.

However, the power to tell stories has long been associated with the power to tell lies.²⁷ This association is evident in *A Little Princess*, but has serious, diagnostic significance in an era when a capacious disorder called ‘moral insanity’ was the most commonly diagnosed childhood mental illness.²⁸ Henry Maudsley summarizes popular nineteenth-century opinion when he claims that children could not ‘go mad’ before they have ‘some mind to go wrong, and then only in proportion to the quantity and quality of mind which [they] have’.²⁹ As this suggests, because of their advanced ‘quantity and quality of mind’, precocious children were thought unusually vulnerable to ‘an adult type of insanity’.³⁰ I will argue that precociously articulate children were particularly prone to exemption from the rule that children could not ‘go mad’, because they were particularly capable of telling stories. Just as Captain Crewe’s death liberates Sara from the redemptive function of many other precocious children in more canonical Victorian literature, so, in an era when Sara’s precocious ability to tell stories is diagnostically significant, that ability becomes a powerful challenge to the assumptions about children and adults implied by the attitude to children’s stories in contemporary psychology.

One recurrent symptom of moral insanity was the habit of lying. James Crichton-Browne, for example, specifies dishonesty among the principal traits of morally insane patients. Of the three cases he describes in more detail, one ‘quick, lively child, of ready apprehension’ becomes ‘prone to invent falsehoods’.³¹ It is seemingly sufficient to describe another patient as ‘lazy and deceitful, given to lying and pilfering, and thoroughly disreputable even when a boy’.³² Similarly, Robert Hunter Steen lists among the ‘crimes against the moral code’ committed by morally insane patients the following: ‘[a] confirmed liar’, ‘[f]alse accusations against young men’, ‘[u]psetting the discipline of nursing-homes and private houses by lying gossip’, and ‘making false accusations against the school authorities’.³³ Such studies indicate that in the late nineteenth century ‘the desire to tell a

²⁷ Philip Sydney’s *The Defence of Poesy* (1595) is a particularly well-known analysis of this association, but see, for example, A. R. Sharrock, ‘The Art of Deceit: Pseudolus and the Nature of Reading’, *The Classical Quarterly* 46.1 (1996), 152-74, (pp. 152-56) on the same association in classical literature.

²⁸ Alexander von Gontard, ‘The Development of Child Psychiatry in 19th Century Britain’, *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 29.5 (1988), 569-88 (p. 573).

²⁹ Henry Maudsley, *The Pathology of Mind: A Study of its Distempers, Deformities and Disorder* (London: Macmillan, 1895), p. 364.

³⁰ Von Gontard, p. 572. See von Gontard p. 571-2 on other exceptions to the nineteenth-century ‘rule’ that children could not be insane.

³¹ James Crichton-Browne, ‘Psychical Diseases in Early Life’, *The Journal of Mental Science* 6 (1860), 284-329 (p. 314).

³² Crichton-Browne, p. 315.

³³ Robert Hunter Steen, ‘Moral Insanity’, *The Journal of Mental Science* 59 (1913), 478-86 (p. 478-9).

falsehood' was considered to be, as Steen puts it, 'a natural disposition' in cases of moral insanity.³⁴

This was of particular significance for cases of childhood moral insanity. Because lying was a recurrent diagnostic criterion, precociously articulate children must have been particularly susceptible to this diagnosis. Savage makes a clear statement of the potential connection between moral insanity and a form of precocity manifested particularly in the ability to lie, claiming that 'it is not very uncommon to find some genius, or, at all events, some precocity [...] in some morally insane children'.³⁵ More particularly, '[t]he morally insane child generally begins to evidence the fact by persistent lying'.³⁶ Fletcher Beach likewise contends that the 'intellectual faculties are unimpaired' in cases of childhood moral insanity; in fact, 'the child is usually sharp and clever, but morally he is a thief, a liar, full of cunning, horribly cruel, and often of immoral tendencies'.³⁷ Lying is central to the diagnosis of moral insanity. Savage and Beach imply that precocity enables the child to lie, and therefore that precocious linguistic abilities have the potential to inform a diagnosis of childhood moral insanity.

Moreover, since Savage has 'seen one or two instructive cases in which the power of romancing as a genius and the power or habit of lying was scarcely to be distinguished', storytelling or romancing becomes potentially equivalent to lying.³⁸ According to this observation, the propensity to tell stories at all is potentially a symptom of moral insanity. It is therefore not surprising that any imaginative story-telling by children was viewed warily by psychologists of the period. In *Studies of Childhood* (1895), for example, Sully claims that '[a]n unbridled fancy and strong love of effect will lead an older child to say what he knows, vaguely at least, at the moment to be false in order to startle and mystify others'.³⁹ Sully 'distinctly challenge[s] the assertion that lying is instinctive' in children, but such an assertion is implied in his association of precocious articulacy with a tendency to exaggerate, modify, or conceal the truth.⁴⁰

³⁴ Steen, p. 480.

³⁵ George Savage, 'Moral Insanity', *The Journal of Mental Science* 27 (1881), 147-55 (p. 150).

³⁶ Savage, p. 150.

³⁷ Fletcher Beach, 'Insanity in Children', *The Journal of Mental Science* 44 (1898), 459-75 (p. 470). See p. 473 for Beach's claim that 'over-pressure' might cause mental disorders, including moral insanity; this again indicates that association between precocity and mental illness which von Gontard has identified.

³⁸ Savage, p. 150.

³⁹ James Sully, *Studies of Childhood* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1919), p. 255.

⁴⁰ Sully, *Studies*, p. 264.

This anxiety about precociously articulate children indicates that children's language was viewed differently from the 'adult' language in which, for example, such studies were produced. The dividing line between adult and child which Gubar describes is clearly at work in psychological analyses of precociously articulate children of the late-Victorian period, and operated to make pathological in the child the very quality – language – through which the adult could create such pathology. The status of language – either objective, scientific, and diagnostic, or misleading, deceitful and fanciful – thus contributed to the separation of adult and child in late nineteenth-century Child Study.

If 'Victorian culture' was, as Shuttleworth has demonstrated, 'obsessed by the horror of the lie', the association here outlined between lies and childhood moral insanity implies a particular horror of children's lies.⁴¹ It is consistent with this that it is particularly the accusation that she has a 'tendency to deceit' which propagates Jane Eyre's momentous rebellion against her aunt Reed.⁴² Robert Newsom, however, claims that '[w]hat is so strikingly authentic in [*Jane Eyre*'s] opening chapters is not the child's voice [...] but rather the vivid memory of the child's angry sense of powerlessness'.⁴³ The adult Jane's retrospect is as significant as the child's voice. Jane's insistence that 'I am not deceitful' is therefore not only an instance of precocious self-assertion, but also absolves her adult self of the morbid implications of childhood deceitfulness.⁴⁴ There is no such retrospect in *A Little Princess*, and, therefore, no such absolution.

Newsom identifies *Jane Eyre* as a major influence on Dickens's experiments with first-person retrospective accounts of childhood. The remark that the 'most extended and complicated example of Dickens's writing in this mode' – the opening scene of *Great Expectations* (1861) – 'is not really about childhood at all, but about growing up', could be applied to a large extent to the opening chapters of *Jane Eyre* itself, in which retrospection is likewise so central.⁴⁵ If Victorian culture had a particular horror of children's lies, *Jane Eyre*

⁴¹ Shuttleworth, *Mind*, p. 333.

⁴² Brontë, p. 35.

⁴³ Robert Newsom, 'Fictions of Childhood', in *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. by John O. Jordan, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 92-105 (p. 100).

⁴⁴ Brontë, p. 37.

⁴⁵ Newsom, p. 101. Maria Teresa Chialant argues that this and other autobiographical fictions by Dickens emphasis the 'distance between narrator and character and give the former a leading role' (Chialant, 'The Adult Narrator's Memory of Childhood in David's, Esther's and Pip's Autobiographies,' in *Dickens and the Imagined Child*, ed. Peter Merchant and Catherine Waters (Surrey: Ashgate, 2015), 77-92 (p. 88).

suggests that this may have been owing less to concerns about the child-liar itself than to concerns about the adult that child might grow into.

By contrast, because *A Little Princess* is concerned not with the adult Sara might become but with the child she is, this text offers no denial of its protagonist's deceitfulness. Indeed, the narrator repeatedly suggests that by telling stories Sara is blurring the boundaries between imagination and reality in ways that are closely akin to the 'horror' of deceit. Sara's power and tendency to 'tell stories' is, moreover, as problematic for adults within *A Little Princess* as it was for child psychologists of the time:

[s]ometimes, when [Miss Minchin] was in the midst of some harsh, domineering speech, [she] would find the still, unchildish eyes fixed upon her with something like a proud smile in them. At such times she did not know that Sara was saying to herself: "You don't know that you are saying these things to a princess [...] I only spare you because I *am* a princess, and you are a poor, stupid, unkind, vulgar old thing". (p. 145)

Sara, moreover, 'spoke in a manner which had an effect even upon Miss Minchin. It almost seemed for the moment to her narrow, unimaginative mind that there must be some real power hidden behind this candid daring' (p. 148). Miss Minchin describes Sara a 'beggar' (p. 92). In contradicting these words with her insistence that 'I *am* a princess', Sara has, as McGillis observes, created a (transient) world of her 'own making', but she has done so through perhaps intentional deceit.

As Elizabeth Lennox Keyser notes, 'Sara's repeated use of the phrase "telling a story" for telling a lie reminds us of how closely related the two acts are'.⁴⁶ Consequently, when, for example, Sara insists that 'I should be telling a story if I said [Miss Minchin] was beautiful [...] and I should know I was telling a story' she highlights, by refuting, the connection between Miss Minchin and herself (p. 13). It is because she can match Miss Minchin's ability to conceal and manipulate through story that Sara can oppose and, momentarily, triumph over the world as Miss Minchin tells it. Sara and Miss Minchin *both* have the power to tell stories, and it is particularly through this equivalence that *all* stories are associated with lies in *A Little Princess*. This text represents the parallel between childhood storytelling and childhood deceit which features so recurrently in child psychology. In doing so, however, it suggests

⁴⁶ Elizabeth Lennox Keyser, "'The Whole of the Story': Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess*", in *Triumphs of the Spirit in Children's Literature*, ed. by Francelia Butler and Richard Rotert (Connecticut: Library Professional Publications, 1986), 230-43 (p.234).

that Sara represents a threat to the adult because, by disrupting any clear distinction between the child and the adult, she indicates that adult story-tellers are liars too.

A Little Princess undermines the distinction between adult and child sustained by the adult-oriented function of precocious children in contemporary literature, and by the pathologization of children's language in contemporary psychology. As will be argued, Burnett's novel also posits that the stories of the precociously articulate child are constructed as 'lies', and the child herself is an 'agent' of adult stories in contemporary discourse, because she otherwise threatens to become the equal of adults, like Miss Minchin, but also like Sully, Burnett, and their peers in the fields of Child Study and children's literature, as a legitimate, alternative source of ideas and stories about children.

III. Precocity and Power

A Little Princess engages with the threat to adult stories presented by the precocious child. 'A Learned Infant' exemplifies the effacement of this threat which characterizes so many studies of precocity in the period. Despite its apparent concern for the precocious child, the account in 'A Learned Infant' of the description of Christian's death at the age of four is principally an account of his 'last scholarly achievement [...] a learned commentary on a map of Palestine' (p. 60). As Sully says, it is the 'fulness and accuracy of his geographical and historical knowledge' which 'are here presented in a striking light' (p. 60). This conclusion is in fact consistent with the style of Sully's essay throughout. Despite pages of description of his precocious articulacy, and several quotations, usually in Latin, which are attributed to him, nothing Christian is recorded as saying indicates any particular precocity of thought or language whatsoever.

Consequently, whatever the precocious child might have the capacity to think or say is effaced in 'A Learned Infant', which becomes instead a testimony to Sully's own thoughts, and articulacy, on the subject of precocious children. In the skilful display of satirical writing which 'A Learned Infant' represents, Sully's abilities and insights become more prominent than those of the child ostensibly defended by his satire. Just as Christian's biography is as much a monument to the abilities of his tutor as to Christian himself, so 'A Learned Infant' is as much a tribute to Sully's skill as a child psychologist and writer as it is his attempt to promote a better understanding of children.

The absence of the articulate child from Sully's essay, the association of children's language with deceit and even moral insanity in contemporary psychiatry, and the early

demise or adult retrospect which characterizes such children in much literature, all register, in different ways, resistance to the potential power of the precociously articulate child itself. *A Little Princess* registers the same resistance to that child's power. However, Burnett's novel also engages with the possibilities the child represents, to suggest that a collapse of the separation between child and adult can be highly productive. In particular, by making adult stories equivalent to children's stories, precocity can exonerate the deceit which all stories must represent.

Like 'A Learned Infant', *A Little Princess* is as much an acknowledgement of the narrator's as of the child's skill as a story-teller. In fact, by making a spectacle of the moment when Sara's stories fail, and by ostentatiously coming to her rescue, the narrator shows the same antipathy towards the precocious child that Sully and others demonstrate in different ways. At this point, Sara is overcome by loneliness, and her pretence that her doll, Emily, is a real person, fails to comfort her. Confronted with the reality that '[t]here was nobody but Emily', Sara 'looked at the staring glass eyes and complacent face, and suddenly a sort of heartbroken rage seized her. She lifted her little savage hand and knocked Emily off the chair, bursting into a passion of sobbing' (p. 132). Immediately after this crisis in Sara's story-telling powers, the narrator reiterates a wish Sara has previously expressed that 'someone would take the empty house next door' to Miss Minchin's school (p. 133).

A mere two paragraphs after this, Sara 'saw, to her great delight, that [...] a van full of furniture had stopped before the next house, the front doors were thrown open, and men were going in and out carrying heavy packages and pieces of furniture' (p. 134). The new neighbour happens to be a very rich friend of Sara's dead father, who feels responsible for Captain Crewe's death, and who therefore ultimately rescues Sara from Miss Minchin's cruelty. The narrator rectifies the world that Sara's stories have, prominently, failed to alter, in an audacious coincidence which seems to make a spectacle of the narrator's power to alter a world which Sara's stories cannot change.

If this is the 'moment of interpretation' which, according to Kermode, 'gives sense and structure' to *A Little Princess*, however, it is problematic for two major reasons.⁴⁷ Firstly, because it over-writes Sara's power, this moment is difficult to reconcile with the centrality of that power in the 'larger whole' of the novel.⁴⁸ This seeming resolution to *A Little Princess* is inconsistent with the person of its protagonist. Secondly, the almost clumsily obtrusive

⁴⁷ Kermode, p. 16.

⁴⁸ Kermode, p. 17.

plotting at this point has obvious repercussions in the context of the novel's association between storytelling and lying. It hints at the fictionality – the deceit – embedded in the novel and the act of novel-writing itself.

The moment when the narrator obtrusively engineers a happy ending for Sara is, however, not the moment of 'sense' for the novel. *A Little Princess* in fact engages with both problems raised by this moment. The preface to *A Little Princess* explicitly discusses the ethical problems associated with storytelling in the period. Its title, 'The Whole of the Story,' must be read as ironic in light of its substance. It opens with the statement that

I do not know whether many people realise how much more than is ever written there really is in a story – how many parts of it are never told – how much more really happened, than there is in the book one holds in one's hand.⁴⁹

In other words, 'The Whole of the Story' will not be told, a confession of deceit by omission.

However, the preface insists that such deceit is necessitated by the very nature of story: the whole of the story cannot be told because 'if one told all that really happened perhaps the book would never end' (p. v). Burnett's claim that 'in this new "Little Princess" I have put all I have been able to discover' is, then, a statement of the limits, rather than the extent, of the 'truth' of her story (p. vii). When Henry James observes that '[r]eally, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so', he re-formulates that long-acknowledged association between art and deceit.⁵⁰ Burnett points to the same association not to problematize it, but to ask why it should be problematic.

Thus, although in claiming that 'really', truthfully, the whole of the story would 'stop nowhere', Burnett implies that the truth is impossible when story is the medium, the difference between truth and deceit is not necessarily the difference between good and bad in *A Little Princess*. Though they are equals in their capacity to tell misleading stories, Sara and Miss Minchin are obviously differentiated in moral terms throughout the text. Sara's precocious ability to match Miss Minchin in story-telling therefore not only points to the equivalence between Miss Minchin's stories and her own, but, by thus highlighting Miss

⁴⁹ Burnett, 'The Whole of the Story', in Burnett, *A Little Princess* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1917), v-vii, at p. v. Subsequent page numbers will be cited in-text.

⁵⁰ Henry James, 'Preface to *Roderick Hudson*', in *Henry James: The Critical Muse: Selected Literary Criticism*, ed. by Roger Gard (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 450-63 (p. 452).

Minchin's deceitfulness, actually offers a justification for Sara's own lies. Miss Minchin may be threatened by Sara's precocious storytelling, but the novel's focalization through Sara indicates that Sara is vindicated in representing such a threat. Kucich argues that by 'idealising conduct that hybridizes honesty and dishonesty', Victorian novelists could 'construct potent new kinds of moral sophistication'.⁵¹ It is particularly by collapsing the perceived moral difference between adults' stories and children's stories, and thereby idealizing Sara's conduct in contrast with Miss Minchin's, that *A Little Princess* suggests that some stories (or lies) can constitute moral action.

Sara precociously emblemizes the moral potential of story-telling: *A Little Princess* offers this doubly transgressive child as an alternative to those powerful and mutually constitutive binaries, adult/ child, and truth/ deceit. Sara's ethical transgressions thus constitute a defence of any story-telling, and of any story-tellers. As this implies, although *A Little Princess* betrays in its plot the antipathy towards the precocious child characteristic of the period, it also, paradoxically, recognizes the legitimacy of Sara's power. It does so by making her a 'person' in herself rather than a reflection or anticipation of an adult, but also by valorizing her as an alternative source of plot. The happy end to the narrator-plotted story of Sara's rescue is told simultaneously with another happy ending, and *this* one is brought about by a story told by Sara herself.

While out running errands, Sara finds a sixpence outside a bakery. Though she is starving, she notices a beggar, 'hungrier than I am', sitting nearby (p. 164). In the story she tells herself, in which she is a princess, the beggar becomes 'one of the populace' (p. 165). Since, according to Sara, princesses 'always shared – with the populace', she uses the sixpence to buy six buns, and gives five to the beggar (p. 165). Her story does not materially help Sara herself at this point; indeed, it works to her disadvantage. It nevertheless undoubtedly has a positive effect; Sara's kindness is noticed by the baker, who is inspired by it to invite the beggar to '[g]et yourself warm' in her shop.

The novel then resumes its narrative of Sara's difficulties. However, at the end, re-established in privilege and luxury by the narrator, Sara visits the bakery:

a girl came out [...] it was the beggar-child, clean and neatly clothed, and looking as if she had not been hungry for a long time [...] "You see", said the [baker], "I told her to come when she was hungry, and when she'd come I'd give her odd jobs to do [...]"

⁵¹ Kucich, p. 4.

and the end of it was, I've given her a place an' a home [...]. Her name's Anne. (p. 256)

Sara's stories do not, ultimately, enable her to 'fashion' her own world, as McGillis claims, but they do help another child who is given a role in her story.⁵²

Sara thus creates a story which has an effect comparable with and equivalent to the narrator's, an equivalence which produces tension between narrator and child, even as it sustains the power of the child to tell her own stories. Rosemarie Bodenheimer describes the separation between Dickens's precociously 'canny' children and the retrospective adult narrators they have become as 'the rift between observation and language: the child part observes; the adult part puts things into words'.⁵³ In *Jane Eyre*, *Great Expectations*, and so many other studies of precocity, if precocious children do not die to indict the adult whose responsibilities they take on, they grow up to vindicate, through language, the adult formed by that child's precocious knowledge. *A Little Princess*, which treats the precocious child as a subject in itself, obviates any such 'rift' between child and adult, and thus obviates any moral difference between children's language and adults' language, and between deceit and the truth.

A Little Princess thereby validates the lies told in stories by adults of the Victorian period, among them Sully's disingenuous satire, 'A Learned Infant'. *A Little Princess* reminds us that in this essay Sully himself is showing that 'unbridled fancy and strong love of effect' which he has said children display; he is, effectively, saying 'what he knows [...] to be false in order to startle and mystify others'.⁵⁴ *A Little Princess* also proposes, however, that such lies can have a positive effect, as, indeed, Sully's essay may have had, by laughing at some of the more absurd ideas about precocious children circulating at the time.

The non-Darwinian revolution coincided with unprecedented literary and scientific interest in children and childhood. As I have shown, many studies of precocity in the period represent the child as an origin in which both progress and end can, however problematically, be read. They do so in a context in which this story spoke to the origins, development, and future not only of the child, but of the human species it emblemized. By rejecting any

⁵² The different expectations for working and for middle-class children outlined by Gorham are clearly operating here. See Carole Dunbar, 'Rats in Black Holes and Corners: An Examination of Frances Hodgson Burnett's Portrayal of the Urban Poor,' in Carpenter, pp. 67-77, for a discussion of class in Burnett's fiction.

⁵³ Rosemarie Bodenheimer, 'Dickens and the Knowing Child', in Merchant and Waters, 13-26 (p. 19).

⁵⁴ Sully, *Studies*, p. 255.

essential moral difference between children's stories and such 'adult' stories as Sully's, *A Little Princess* points to the moral potential of stories – or of lies – in themselves. *A Little Princess* therefore exculpates the paradigmatic Victorian story of childhood progress to adult-as-end which the separation of child and adult enables.

However, *A Little Princess* also points to the demise of that tenacious Victorian paradigm. Shuttleworth notes the simultaneous emergence of 'more permissive attitudes' to storytelling by children and of 'an extended genre of imaginative literature for children' at the turn of the twentieth century.⁵⁵ *A Little Princess* exemplifies these changes, and reveals the growing interest the child in itself which they reflect. Concomitantly, it falsifies the idea of progress insofar as that paradigm is embodied in the child as an incipient adult. By exonerating deceit, the story of Sara Crewe, and the stories she tells, contribute to a hybridization of honesty and dishonesty in which not only the ideas about gender and class which Kucich discusses, but also about adults and children, and therefore about humanity itself, could be rethought. Sara both enacts and encourages that productive transgression of boundaries which so defined, and disturbed, the Victorian period.

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⁵⁵ Shuttleworth, *Mind*, p. 73.