

*The Precocious Child in Victorian Literature and Culture: Development and Selfhood from Darwin to Freud* by Roisín Laing. Durham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024. viii, 279 pp. ISBN 978-3-031-41381-0. \$129.99.

Childhood and adulthood are often positioned on a binary. Children are presumed to be that which adults are not: inexperienced, in progress, incapable, lacking knowledge, and innocent. Children's literature scholarship, however, has demonstrated the problematics of these discourses: not only do they deny children their humanity, but they also invalidate their experiences and the complexity of the vastly different historical and social contexts in which they live. Therefore, the fact that Roisín Laing's monograph focusses on precocious children in Victorian literature and culture allows her to engage with ongoing discussions about children's experiences and agency, as well as how they navigate their relationships with adults and, more broadly, the world. In addition, she participates in debates about how adults are more invested in representing and circulating specific ideologies of children and/or childhood for their own needs (which scholars such as Jacqueline Rose and Perry Nodelman have examined as early as the 1990s, and more recently, Julia Emberley). Therefore, these images of precocious children serve as opportunities to interrogate the Victorians' varying political investments in childhood.

Precocity, as Laing defines it, is "the anachronistic presence of the adult (however defined) in the child" or "the childhood expression of adult characteristics." Throughout the book, she elaborates on this somewhat problematic definition; precocity incorporates the adult characteristics of economic productivity, responsibilities, language, and sexuality. As a result, Laing argues that precocious children subvert and "undermin[e] the equation of growth with progress" and effectively offer alternative ways of imagining and understanding both individual and species development. For the Victorians, the adult human was often seen as the peak of development, a belief that was echoed in their anthropocentric perspectives, and that scholars of animal studies have also established. Thus, precocious children invite us to think about growth outside of progressive, hierarchical, and teleological frameworks, frameworks that – as Laing points out – are similarly challenged in Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Laing's monograph thus merges childhood studies with broader Victorian scholarship on science; in the Introduction, she draws attention to the fact that these two fields – children's literature and the history of science/evolution – are rarely compared. As a result, this study addresses this gap in scholarship.

Precocious children proliferate in Victorian literature and culture, and Laing analyzes depictions of them in a range of texts between 1850 and 1928,