“A School of Vice:” Child Actresses, Gender, the Body, and Commodity in 19th Century Anglo-American Theater

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Introduction

On January 28, 1859, a theater audience in Macon, Georgia watched as the star actress burned to death. Mary Marsh, of the Marsh Troupe of Philadelphia, was playing a central role in *The Naiad Queen,* and as she danced across the stage, her exquisite fairy costume brushed into a candle and she was instantly engulfed by flames As described by a company member:

> After the first act of *The Naiad Queen,* Mary, in her blithesome glee, ran tripping across the stage so near a candle hat the flare of it caught the bottom of her fairy dress, and in a moment she was a mass of flame. Her mother and Georgiana were instantly by her side, but she was literally a ball of fire, and in their efforts to smother the flame were themselves badly burned. Poor little Mary screamed terrifically and the house was in frightful commotion. It was soon all over with her. She died the next afternoon.[1]

Mary March was not even twelve years old.

In the nineteenth century Anglo-American theater, children were often center stage, for better or for worse. Child actors participated in theater, opera, pantomime, melodrama, and even domestic home theater productions. It is difficult to estimate how many children worked within the entertainment industry, with contemporary researchers claiming there were 1,000 child actors in London alone, to more than 10,000 nationwide.[2] Across the United States as well, there existed an entire cottage industry of child actors who, although unrelated, toured the country as "family-based troupes."[3] On both sides of the Atlantic, it was a verifiable phenomenon,

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[1] Shauna Vey, *Childhood and Nineteenth-Century American Theater,* (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 2016) 60.

[2] Dyan Colclough. *Child Labor in the British Entertainment Industry,* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 16-17.

[3] Vey, *Childhood and Nineteenth-Century American Theater*, 15.

The world of child acting was a complicated and multifaceted trend within the Anglosphere. Children performed in virtually every kind of performance, from circuses to ballets to street performance; however, in this project, I aim to chiefly focus on children in drama. Child actors, also called stage children, tended to star in operas, such as Gilbert and Sullivan shows, melodramas, and stage comedies. Some children's troupes, such as the Marsh Troupe of Philadelphia, were all-children's troupes, and some performances, such as the "Children's Pinafore," featured only child actors. In Great Britain, young actors often starred in pantomimes, which are musical comedies intended for a juvenile audience, often adaptations of popular fairy tales. In the United States, they often starred in blackface minstrel shows, and, towards the end of the century, traveling vaudeville shows and "pickaninny"[4] shows, which toured across the United States and worldwide.[5]

It is important to note why this analysis is a cross-Atlantic one. One can see that the theater landscapes in the United States and the United Kingdom had some key differences; however, both had prominent cultures of child acting. The reason for this shared analysis is that the United States and the United Kingdom had similar cultures of child entertainment and childhood innocence, which allows for shared trends in the world of children's theater. The aim of this comparison is to show how ideas of childhood innocence, especially white childhood innocence, were equally prevalent on both sides of the Atlantic, and were equally distorted by the commodification of children's bodies. Furthermore, many all children's troupes performed in both the United States and the United Kingdom, regardless of their actual origin.

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[4] This racial pejorative refers to negative stereotypes of Black children. This offensive word is not used uncritically, but to call attention to the racialization of Black child actors at the time.

[5] For a more in-depth analysis of the "pickaninny troupes" of the early twentieth century, see Jayna Brown, "Babylon Girls" (Durham and London, Duke University Press), 2008.

For the most part, the world of nineteenth century child acting only began to receive scholarly attention in the 1990s. The first Children's Studies program was established in 1991 at Brooklyn College, and from there, this interdisciplinary field finally started to flourish. Some of the most important scholarship is by scholars of theater and children's literature, such as Dyan Colclough, Anne Party, and Shauna Vey; these books emerged from 2008 onwards. Before then, child actors were merely a footnote in theater history, and historians rarely analyzed child actors from a labor perspective. Only recently have scholars begun to look into the phenomenon of children of color in the theater, one example of such literature being "Babylon Girls" by Jayna, Brown, but racial analyses of child actors are still few and far between. Because the majority of child acting scholarship comes from scholars of literature and theater, my analysis will be interdisciplinary.

Most academic studies of child actors focus on the struggles they faced in their careers, and for good reason. Throughout the industry, child actors endured abuse, sexualization, and overwork; however, this burden was borne most heavily by the young girls in the industry. Child acting was one of the few industries in which girls were paid at an equal or higher wage as their male counterparts.[6] Whether playing fairies and sylphs, singing as Gilbert and Sullivan characters, or crossdressing as Little Lord Fauntleroy, talented and attractive young girls were in high demand in the nineteenth century world of theater. Therefore, this project focuses on girl actors in particular. Girl actors were the most sought-after, as well as the most in danger; therefore, child actresses must take center stage in this analysis.

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[6] Colclough, *Child Labor in the British Victorian Entertainment Industry*, 38.

In the first chapter, I discuss how child actors faced danger, death, and injury in their field. Child actors occupied a strange space in the labor force; they were not physical laborers in the way of factory workers or coal miners, yet their jobs were nonetheless physically demanding and often dangerous. The immense physical strain of acting often took a toll on the health and well-being of children in the industry. The theater in the nineteenth century was not a safe space, by any means. Fires, stampedes, and outbreaks of disease were common. Young girls were especially at risk. Due to their extravagant and flammable costumes, and the limited technology of safe stage lighting, girls and young women were the foremost victims of onstage fires. Children also suffered from overwork, disease, and other workplace hazards which were not unique to the acting industry.

In my second chapter, I explore how child actors were often victims of sexualization and sexual abuse. Girls, especially, were advertised as sexual commodities, clothed in revealing costumes onstage, and subject to abuse and harassment by audience members and adult members of the theater industry alike. Girl actors were also sexualized through Orientalist and racialized imagery (regardless of the girls' actual races), eroticized crossdressing acts, and the assumption that they were more adult than their non-working peers. Because girl actors occupied a liminal space between the strongly held binaries of the nineteenth century world, it was easier for audiences to bypass the mores of the time that required chaste respect for children.

The third chapter considers the trans-Atlantic reform movements against the child acting industry, and their successes in failures. Because of these shared dangers, many reformers in the United States and the United Kingdom began to campaign for regulations in the industry starting in the 1870s and 1880s. On both sides of the Atlantic, reformers pushed for regulations in the

child acting industry, and published exposés on the dangers of children on stage. Both American and English reformers drew parallels between children's physical dangers and moral dangers, connecting the literal bodies of children to their moral souls. That is to say, sexual danger and physical danger were one and the same. In the end, it took a great deal of time for actual reform to reach both the United Kingdom and the United States, but regulations were eventually implemented in both countries to protect stage children.

Overall, this project explores how child actresses in particular functioned as gender, raced, and sexualized bodies. The physical bodies of girl actors and their moral lives were intrinsically connected to most of nineteenth century society. Because they occupied bodily spaces that could not be neatly classified into racial, gender, or class categories, child actresses inhabited a fascinating liminal space in the Anglo-American theater world.

"It Won't Kill 'Em:" Death, Danger, and Disease in Child Acting

The death of Mary Marsh was far from an isolated incident. Nineteenth century child actors in the United Kingdom and the United States alike were exposed to a wide range of dangers, some of which resulted in death, injury, or physical damage. Child actors were, above all, working children, and they were therefore exposed to some of the same dangers as other child workers, such as fatigue, disease, and workplace incidents. However, they also faced unique dangers such as stage fires and audience stampedes. Because of the aesthetic demands of their particular careers, safety conditions were often eschewed in favor of spectacle and stimulation, leading to greater dangers in the industry.

Accidents, then, were not infrequent in the theater industry. Even the manner of Mary Marsh's death, however grotesque, was not entirely uncommon. The Victorian public understood fire to be a hazard of the theater experience, and many vocal critics of child acting considered it to be a particular danger of the industry. Fashion historian Alison Matthews David states that between 1797 and 1897, there were more than 10,000 fatalities from theater fires worldwide, and around 516 theaters burned down before 1877.[7] It was such a common occurrence that melodramatic books about young actresses and ballerinas featured fiery deaths as a common plot point.[8] Dance historian Mary Grace Swift claims that "a series of unfortunate brushes of ballet tutus too close to open flames sent at least a dozen young ballerinas to ghastly deaths in America between 1850-1870,"[9] and notes that circuses and theaters had similar such fatalities. In one incident, the Gales, a performing family of four sisters from England, all perished in the same

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[7] Alison Matthews David, *Fashion Victims,* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 152.

[8] Ibid. 154.

[9] Mary Grace Swift, "Dancers in Flames," *Dance Chronicle no. 1,* 1982, 1.

fire, which also claimed the lives of three other young actresses. Tragically, one girl's gauzy tutu caught fire, and the other girls perished as they attempted to extinguish the fire and save her.[10] Still, while most of the dead were young actresses, often young girls and teenagers, and many were celebrated performers, few were as young and as famous as Mary Marsh. The death of the young actress immediately caused horror, outrage, and mourning. Newspaper reports on her demise reached every corner of the United States. However, there was virtually no action to better the safety of children in the theater. One newspaper, *The Cincinnati Enquirer,* published a call for better theater safety,[11] but no other newspaper questioned Mary Marsh's father when he said that the accident was unpreventable. Even Mary Marsh's own father made no tangible changes to prevent future incidents. He stayed in New Orleans and recast her role, as he was already engaged for ten more shows.[12]

Perhaps the date of Mary Marsh's death lessened its impact. In 1859, conversations over the dangers of child acting, and child labor as a whole, were not quite as widespread as they became later in the century. As the century advanced, and concerns over child welfare increased, many reformers began to take a more critical look at the conditions in which child actors worked. Fires and other fatal incidents were a central concern. Reverend Robert Thomson, an advocate for child welfare and against child acting, stated that "in the event of any accidents from explosions, fires, or panics…there is the greatest danger to the lives or limbs of these children who would aggravate their own helplessness in any such panics such as have occurred in

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[10] Mary Grace Swift, "Dancers in Flames," 1.

[11] Shauna Vey, *Childhood and Nineteenth Century Theater,* 72.

[12] Ibid.

Theaters."[13] Thomson's argument was not only that children were helpless in the event of a fire or explosion, but that these incidents occurred regularly in theaters.

It might seem perplexing that theater fires were so frequent, but it was partially due to the technology used in the nineteenth century theater. For the first half of the century, most theaters were lit by gas lamps, or occasionally candles. Although limelights were invented by the 1860s, and electrical lighting started to replace limelights in the 1880s,[14] some theaters continued to use gas lighting, mainly because electrical lighting proved too unflattering.[15] Furthermore, some theater companies were willing to lean into the dangerous effects of fire if it provided a stunning visual effect; playwright Dion Boucicault, of *The Octoroon* fame, pioneered a stunt in which the set would literally be engulfed in flames.[16] The stunt was successful, partially because it had to be put out by a real fire engine, but the fact that theater companies were willing to go to such lengths for aesthetics proves the importance of appearance over safety. This apathy towards performers' safety is best exemplified by the prevailing attitude towards accidents in aerial stunts.[17] Critic Tom Robertson referred to these aerial displays as "an ingenious piece of cruelty," especially due to the prevailing belief that in the case of malfunction, the girls were "young and strong, and it won't kill 'em."[18] Theater historian Percy Fitzgerald, who viewed aerial machinery

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[13] Anne Varty, *Children and Theater in Victorian Britain: All Work, No Play, (*London: Palgrave MacMillan), 2008, 195.

[14] Frederick Penzel, *Theatre Lighting Before Electricity,* 1978.

[15] Anthony Jenkins, *The Making of Victorian Drama*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1991, 25.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Several acrobatic incidents involving child actors are recorded in Parliament archives, including the death of a fourteen year old boy. See Anne Varty, *Child and Theatre,* 160-161, for more.

[18] Varty, *Children and Theater,* 38.

as a type of "ingenuity," nevertheless noted that they had "to be supplemented by extraordinary precautions to prevent accidents."[19] Like aerial stunts, fire-related stunts were considered aesthetically pleasing enough to risk accidents.

Furthermore, stage costumes added another layer of danger in cases of fires. Many theater costumes, particularly those for young women and girls, were made of gauze and tulle. Tulle, sometimes called "bobbinet," is made from a lightweight fiber, such as cotton or silk, woven in a honeycomb pattern, which makes it prone to inflammation.[20] While the fabric is notoriously flammable, the lightweight, angelic look of tulle tutus proved too popular to ditch in the name of safety. Indeed, aesthetics often trumped safety in the theater. For example, by 1859, French chemist Jean-Adolphe Carteron invented "carteronade," a chemical method for flameproofing clothing. Despite encouragement from governments — the French Empire even mandated carteronade for stage performers in 1859 — most dancers and actors eschewed carteronade in favor of traditional tulle.[21] According to historian Allison Matthews David, the carteronade tulle was too stiff and lent itself to yellowing, making it undesirable for young actresses. Once again, aesthetics was more important than the safety of young actresses.

The nineteenth century theater was a dangerous profession; however, not all of these dangers were quite as dramatic as fires and fatal falls. Some risks and injuries were less sensational, but were nonetheless common in urban spaces in both the United States and Britain. One of the chief issues facing child actors was that of overwork. Children had to deal with long working hours — often working well into the night — dangerous stunts, and even physical

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[19] Varty, *Children and Theatre,* 38.

[20] David, *Fashion Victims,* 152.

[21] David, *Fashion Victims,* 157.

abuse. Exhaustion was one of the more common dangers. While fire was more sensational — and led directly to more gruesome deaths — exhaustion and disease were more frequent causes of suffering in the theater industry.

Famed feminist, writer, and political activist, Ellen Barlee, one of the foremost advocates against child abuse in Great Britain, collected evidence of child abuse in the theater industry throughout the early 1880s. Her assistant, Annette Bear, related the story of an "Extremely fatigued" seven-year-old actress, who had to walk home from the theater at night, despite "sugaring from a weak throat and general debility."[22] Eventually "her legs and ankles were…so swollen" that she could barely walk. The girl recalled three different occasions in which she was almost attacked and sexually assaulted by grown men, and barely escaped due to her injuries. Of course this was a double danger: this girl was not only physically hurt due to her swollen ankles, fatigue, and sore throat, but was also in danger because she was unaccompanied at night.

To many nineteenth century reformers, fatigue was especially dangerous for young girls. One of these critics was Dr. Edward Clarke, a well-known physician who wrote *Sex in Education; or, A Fair Chance for Girls.* This 1873 volume argued that while girls deserved a chance at education, their education could not be the same as boys because they did not have the physical or mental capacity for it. According to Clarke, "If excessive labor, either mental or physical, is imposed upon children, male or female, their development will be in some way checked."[23] This correlation meant that overwork or lack of sleep in youth would negatively impact a child once they aged. Furthermore, Clarke believed that rest and moderation were

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[22] Varty, *Children and Theatre,* 211

[23] Edward Clarke, *Sex in Education; or, A Fair Chance for Girls,* 1873, 71

especially important for children's development. He claimed that: "Girls, between the ages of fourteen and eighteen, must have sleep, not only for repair and growth, like boys, but for the additional task of constructing, or, more properly speaking, of developing and perfecting then, a reproductive system, —the engine within an engine."[24] That is, girls must sleep more and work less (mentally or physically) than boys, lest their future reproductive capacities suffer. The problem with overwork was not only that girls were suffering, but that they might not develop properly into adult women, or, worst of all, might not become healthy mothers.

Fatigue and disease often went hand-in-hand. One of the worst scourges of all was that of the dreaded tuberculosis. One anonymous commentator stated that "The reason why many of them [stage children] die of consumption…is that they have often to put their stage clothes on before they are dried after having been washed."[25] Many 19th century critics believed that the fluctuations in temperature, paired with the scant, and often damp costumes of the theater led to a greater spread of tuberculosis. Others blamed the physical exertion of the career. One commentator stated that "there's many a ballet girl of weak constitution who sows the seeds of consumption and kindred diseases in her system through the continual exposure and physical exertion of her life."[26] That is to say, children in the entertainment industry consistently found themselves exposed to various diseases, and unable to fight them off because of a weakened immune system. However, reformers such as Barlee seemed to believe that the entertainment industry did not take the health of their young performers seriously. Barlee mentioned overhearing a conversation between two young girls in the theater, one "who looked as if she

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[24] Clarke, *Sex in Education,* 59.

[25] *The Theatrical Times,* April 19, 1894, from Colclough, *Child Labor,* 61.

[26] Anon "The Fairies of the Stage," from Colclough, *Child Labor,* 61.

were dying of consumption and coughed incessantly," and a concerned friend. The sick girl said that she had "a mind somewhat to kill myself" but that she went on nonetheless.

Nineteenth century reforms often attributed the spread of illnesses to miasmas, damp clothing, and fluctuating temperatures. While those opinions do not hold up in the face of modern science, there are valid reasons why illness spread so fast among stage children. Backstage conditions were notoriously cramped and unsanitary. One commentator noted her surprise as she "crossed the dirty stage and saw the squalor and filth which is hidden up behind the scenes" and questioned "how delicate and dainty dresses and brilliant costumes ever retain an hours' freshness with such surroundings."[27] Even the schools retained at the theaters for the stage children were in terrible condition. One School Board Inspector, reporting on the Drury Lane Theater, noted that "The premises are wretched and even dangerous…Most of the children appeared to suffer from cold on the day of my visit."[28] Despite the glamor displayed on stage, real working conditions were harsh, unsanitary, and dangerous. Because the role of child actors was to put on an appearance, oftentimes, the uglier aspects of their job were swept under the rug. Most audiences were not aware of the squalid conditions backstage, or of the tuberculosis outbreaks that persisted among actors; they were only there to watch.

Furthermore, children suffered not in spite of beautiful aesthetics, but because of the appearances they had to uphold. Girls especially were harmed by the constant demands for beauty and perfection. Theater fires could have been curbed at an earlier point with lighting innovations, but because limelights and electrical lights were deemed unflattering, gas lights

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[27] Our Ladies' Column. Penelope. *Leicester Chronicle and the Leicestershire Mercer.* April 14, 1888, from Colclough, *Child Labor,* 58.

[28] Mrs. M. Fawcett, "The Employment of Children in Theatres," 829, Varty 131.

continued to prevail in the industry. In order to save young actresses from fire, theaters could have eschewed the use of tulle, a notoriously flammable fabric, or adopted fabric with "carteronade," but the latter was deemed ugly, and theaters preferred using such a delicate, diaphanous, and feminine fabric. Because of their often scanty or overly heavy clothing, young girls suffered in extremely hot or extremely cold temperatures, and often had to wear damp or unclean clothing. The importance of aesthetics above all made these girls' jobs all the more difficult. The theater sold spectacle, beauty, and escapism; all of these factors came before the safety of the performers.

Half Adult, Half Child: Sexualization and Moral Panic

One Sunday in 1886, an eleven-year-old pantomime actress named Alice Vaughan went to get publicity photographs taken with a friend in London. Both girls were wearing their pantomime costumes. The photographer, forty-eight-year-old James Norris, invited Alice back for another photography session the following Monday. That Friday, he was arrested for sexually assaulting Alice. Norris had offered her mother money to keep quiet, but she turned him in, and he was sentenced to six months imprisonment at hard labor.[29]

This story, which appeared in the sensationalist *Illustrated Police News*, outraged many at the time, but many reformers believed such situations to be tragically common. Many reform efforts focused on countering the sexualization and sexual abuse of children in the entertainment industry, by citing such examples of sexual violence as well as overt objectification within the media itself. Even the fact that this story appeared in a publication such as *The Illustrated Police News* speaks to the overarching culture of sexually young actresses. This publication was a sensational magazine, aimed towards young men, which told titillating and often erotic stories of seduction, kidnapping, prostitution, and more. The fact that such a story appeared in this publication shows that some in the media viewed the event was somewhat titillating.

To reformers, all-children's productions were especially a note for concern. While common opinion held that all children's pantomimes and operas were performed for and by children, the audience was often a mix of children and adults. Furthermore, the advertising material often used the children's appearances and young ages as a selling point, raising issues of the audience's intentions. In fact, by the mid and late nineteenth century, child acting as a

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[29] "Assaulting a Pantomime Child," *Illustrated Police News*, February 13, 1886.

profession began to carry a connotation with prostitution and sexualization. One reformer against Elbridge T. Gerry made the connection clear in his tirades against the industry. Gerry was the founder of the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty towards Children, the first society worldwide to fight exclusively for children's welfare. In a 1879 New York Times opinion piece called "How Children are Ruined," Gerry classified the children's troupe as a "school of vice" in which "children of both sexes . . . are thrown together promiscuously" and claimed that "Many of the girls become prostitutes at an early age," after practicing "the opera in a manner . . . painfully suggestive of their ultimate moral degradation."[30] Here, Gerry openly suggested that the theater would lead children, especially girls, to prostitution, promiscuity, and moral degradation. Another commentator, American children's writer and novelist Fanny Fern, wrote an editorial denouncing the child acting industry. She decried the "trading off of these little girls by coarse speculators; the market value of bright eyes— rosy cheeks— polished shoulders, and slender ankles."[31] The writer then asks: "Can you render these young girls an equivalent for the delicate bloom of childish innocence which your coarse touch has brushed away?"[32] While the language here is veiled, the talk of "trading off" young girls based on their physical appearance is a possible reference to prostitution, but it is more like framing these children as commodities or even worse, slaves. The "coarse touch" that ruins these children is another clear reference to potential sexual abuse.

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[30] Elbridge T. Gerry, "How Children Are Ruined," *The New York Times,* 1879, found in M. Gubar, "Who Watched the Children's Pinafore? Age Transvestism on the Nineteenth Century Stage, *Victorian Studies, 54*, 410 - 426.

[31] "Child-Actors," *Tonic Sol-Fa Reporter,* 1858 no. 65: 197.

[32] Ibid.

Sexual abuse and coercion was an open secret in the industry. For example, in Alfred Cohen's interview with Rose Coghlan, a famous English actress who made her career in the United States, he asked her if she would put her daughter on stage. Coghlan replied "the stage is not the life I should select for the girl…It is a very hard life and the temptations (Miss Rose sank her voice) are very great. A girl has no resources when she adopts the stage."[33]. Here, it is clear that Rose Coghlan was aware of the dangers that young girls in particular faced on the stage. Having "no resources," it was easy to succumb to "temptations" or find oneself the victim of sexual exploitation.

Of course, some of the worries were more about morality than abuse. For a young girl to participate in the theater industry, she had to interact with a great number of adults, most of them actors or theater people, work at night, and occasionally learn how to behave as an adult for certain roles. Many reformers believed that this precocity led to greater immorality, including prostitution, alcoholism, and financial ruin. For example, the Ohio moral reform journal *Vigilance* (previously *The Philanthropist)* published a fear mongering piece about child actresses in 1893. This piece criticized the "indecent exposure of the persons of the girls" backstage at the dance halls. According to this article, these "stage children," or that is, "precocious young actresses, in the initial period of theatrical life,"[34] were drinking and reveling in promiscuous company. The issue, of course, is that the "persons," or "bodies" of the girls were exposed to a group of both adult men and women. In the same vein, reformer Elbridge Gerry's 1893 public hearing on the Bill to Protect Stage Children included an exhibition of "little children who sing

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[33] Alan Dale, *Familiar Chats with Queens of the Stage,* 78.

[34] "Exposed Girlhood," *Vigilance,* 1893.

and dance upon the stage," including "dancers in various postures" such as the scandalous "Split" and "leading song and dance artists in scanty clothing."[35] The journalist covering the case challenged Gerry's "bold assertion" that "hundreds of little girls would be ruined and would eventually end up in brothels."[36] However, many commentators did agree with Gerry that joining the theater lead directly to moral degradation, and, occasionally, prostitution.

Worries of sexual abuse did not come without reason. As shown before, there were cases of assault and exploitation of child actors. These were not isolated incidents. In fact, the whole industry of all children's theater marketed itself, inadvertently or not, to an audience of adult admirers. Theater manager John Coleman, in his defense of his profession, admitted that he witnessed an incident of harassment at the Savoy. In this incident, a "certain gentleman who occupied a private box, threw a bouquet on the stage, containing a note with an impudent proposal to one of these young girls."[37] Even though the man was thrown out, it is clear that there was, in fact, an audience that was willing to sexually harass or proposition child actresses. One British newspaper, *The Bat,* contains an anecdote at the children's theater, in which:

> [A] Brutal person in the stalls had the audacity to admit that since the passing of the Criminal Law Amendment Act [which raised the age of consent for girls from thirteen to sixteen], he had ceased to take any pleasure in the children's ballets.[38]

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[35] "To Save Children: Elbridge Gerry Defends Himself Against His Critics." *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Mar 30, 1893.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Anne Varty, *Children and Theatre,* 200.

[38] *The Bat*, January 3, 1883, from Colclough, *Child Labor,* 90.

For context, the Criminal Law Amendment Act was an 1885 Act of Parliament that raised the age of consent from thirteen to sixteen, criminalized any homosexual activity between men, strengthened existing laws against prostitution, and clarified and harshened punishment for sex crimes against children. Therefore, this man claimed that these performances were not enjoyable not because he no longer found these children attractive, but because it was illegal to pursue any relationship with these girls.

Clearly, then, there was an audience for child predators within the sphere of children's entertainment. Charles Dodgson, better known as the writer Lewis Carroll, was not only an admirer of children's theater, but was also friends with many child actresses.[39] Carroll launched a defense of child acting, claiming that the "moral danger" of the theater had no impact on the children. He admitted that "The evil itself is undeniably great," but stated that "it is almost wholly admitted to adult members of the company and the audience."[40] According to Carroll, the children were safe because "Their extreme youth is a powerful safeguard";[41] which is to say, children are younger and more innocent by nature, and therefore, more difficult to lead into temptation. He further argued that children would not be harmed, as "To plot evil against a child, in all its innocence and sweet trustfulness and ignorance of the world, needs no common voluptuary, it needs one so selfish, so pitiless, and so abject a coward as to be beneath one calling himself a man."[42]. Here, Carroll is suggesting that although there may be "evil" adults in the

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[39] Colclough, *Child Labor,* 94.

[40] Lewis Carroll, 1889. "Stage Children," *The Theater : a monthly review of the drama, music and the fine arts,* 115.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid.

audience and behind the stage, children will be safe from this evil on account of their purity and young age. To admit the potential for abuse and exploitation, and yet to dismiss it so easily, is an almost paradoxical statement.

Most troubling of all, Lewis Carroll himself was a photographer of children, and a friend to many young actresses. Many scholars have raised questions about the true nature of Carroll's relationship with children, and some have considered the possibility of Carroll being a pedophile or child predator. Catherine Robson refers to Carroll as the "Victorian era's most famous (or infamous) girl lover";[43] indeed, Carroll befriended many young girls, but grew apart as they aged,[44] collected images and photographs of young girls, some nude or scantily clad,[45] and even photographed and painted little girls himself. Carroll is even quoted as saying that "a girl of about 12 is *my* ideal of beauty."[46] Given all this evidence, it is possible that Carroll's world was closer to that of the brutal James Norris than many of us would like to believe.

Who, then, watched these children's performances, and why? If even Lewis Carroll himself admitted there was "evil" within the adult audience, where exactly "was" this evil? Furthermore, why were there so many adult audiences for children's performances? In her incendiary pamphlet against child acting, *Pantomime Waifs,* Ellen Barlee claimed that while "Pantomimes are supposed to be arranged for children's amusement, the number of grey-headed men and women who invariably form the larger proportion of the audience, prove that these

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[43] Catherine Robson, "Lewis Carroll and the Little Girl: The Art of Self-Effacement," In *Men in Wonderland: The Lost Girlhood of the Victorian Gentleman*, (Princeton University Press, 2001), 137.

[44] Ibid. 138.

[45] Ibid. 144.

[46] *Lewis Carroll, Letters,* ed. Morton Cohen, 1:308, found in Rosetta Mallardi, "The Photographic Eye and the Vision of Childhood in Lewis Carroll," *Studies in Philology* 107, no. 4 (2010), 553.

entertainments…draw the world's *dilettanti,"* that is, a class of adults who are there simply for "the gratification of the senses."[47] Clearly, Barlee believed that adult audience members attended these performances for sensual "gratification," and that the majority of pantomime audiences were adults. Whether or not this is empirically true, Barrel's claim reveals a great deal about prevailing opinions on children's pantomime audiences.

One may wonder why nineteenth century audiences, so obsessed with the purity and innocence of childhood, allowed, and even celebrated, such rampant sexualization and exploitation of children. The truth is, the notion of childhood innocence was not universal, and it certainly did not apply to all children. The idea of childhood innocence applied mainly to white, middle-class or upper-class children. As Robin Bernstein states in the groundbreaking study *Racial Innocence,"* nineteenth century thinkers thought that of childhood as "not innocent but innocence itself," and noted that "This innocence was raced white."[48] Many stage children, however, occupied a tenuous space, sometimes between working class and middle class, and were often both white and racialized in their portal of racialized characters. In "Who Watched the Children's Pinafore?", Marah Gubar discusses the popularity of all-children's performances in the 19th century United States. Children's pantomimes, operas, and Gilbert and Sullivan shows were a verifiable phenomenon, with famous fans such as Walt Whitman, Louisa May Alcott, and Lydia Maria Child. Along with this, Gubar shows that children's performances of pantomimes and operas was "alluring to both adult and child playgoers,"[49] and that this allure was sometimes sexual in nature. American poet Walt Whitman watched and reviewed the show. According to

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[47] Ellen Barlee, *Pantomime Waifs,* 29-30.

[48] Robin Bernstein, *Racial Inocence,* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 4.

[49] Marah Gubar, "Who Watched the Children's Pinafore?" 415.

Whitman, the children played members of a “Turkish harem” and “dashing young Hungarian officers.” He noted how “good-looking…the boy-girls” are in their “tight male dresses,” and stated that "The roguishness [and] the elasticity of their motions makes a spectacle which the youth of the players only redeems from Sybarite voluptuousness!”[50] Here, Whitman is suggesting that the roles and costumes of the children are so sexualized that only their young age prevents them from being sexually appealing. While Whitman believed that, despite their “tight male dresses” and voluptuous motions, the children did not appear overtly erotic, not every audience member seemed to agree. Gubar attributes the sexual appeal of child actors to their nature as “liminal figures —- part child, part adult.”[51] One could go further in saying that their liminal nature in straddling gender —- Whitman refers to the children as androgynous “boy-girls” — and their racial ambiguity as white children performing the role of an Orientalized other, also contributed to this appeal. These children could perform both white childhood innocence, and Orientalized sensuality and voluptuousness. It was easier for adult viewers to sexualize these children if they had an opportunity to view them as a racial or exotic other, or as a performer crossing gender lines. The children could be the best of both worlds for an adult audience, without even realizing it themselves.

Indeed, the phenomenon of children performing racialized productions for the gratification of adults was not uncommon. Another American children’s company, the celebrated Marsh Troupe, performed “Pas de chinois; or Chinese dance” for audiences in their Australian tour, before performing the minstrel farce “Jemmy Bags.”[52] Annette Bear made a visit to a

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[50] Gubar, “Who Watched the Children’s Pinafore?” 422.

[51] Ibid., 421.

[52] “Advertising,” The Ballarat Star. October 16, 1861. Page 3.

children's stage show, featuring a group of child dancers "all girls, from five to 14"[53] who "appeared as little Red Indians in dark skin tights with feathers."[54] The fact that these little girls were not only dressed in scanty clothing, but were dressed as a racial other, is no coincidence. Some commentators in England even referred to child actresses as being surrounded by "houris,"[55] an Orientalist term for members of a harem.

Even when these children were not overtly racialized figures, their racial identities (or perceived racial identities) made them targets for overt sexualization. For example, Shauna Vey cites an iconic image of Mary Marsh as "Little Eva" from *Uncle Tom's Cabin.*[56] Eva is the picture of white childhood innocence: virtuous, pure-hearted, and tragic. However, the image of Mary Marsh, the "infant wonder" as Eva is subtly sexualized, according to Shauna Vey. Marsh's shoulders are exposed, which, while not uncommon for children's clothing in the 1840s, subtly eroticizes her. Furthermore, her pantaloons are in full view of the audience, as are her exposed ankles and feet. While young girls often wore knee-length clothing that exposed their ankles, the fact that Mary Marsh's undergarments are on display is unusual. Most disturbingly, Mary Marsh's youth is a point of emphasis alongside this sexualization; she is deemed the "infant wonder," and her childlike appearance, with her tiny hands and feet and her childish outfit, is emphasized above all. Of course, in this instance, the whiteness of Eva — and Mary Marsh, by extension — is inextricably tied to her perceived innocence and virtue. Her white innocence is not only glorified, but it is fetishized, treated like an erotic ideal. Therefore, it was not only

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53 Annette Bear, *The Times,* February 1889, in Varty, *Children and Theatre,* 212.

54 Annette Bear, *The Times,* in Varty, *Children and Theatre,* 212.

55 Varty, Children and Theatre, 210.

56 Vey, *Childhood and Nineteenth Century American Theatre,* 71.

children dressed as adults who received this sexualized adulation. This portrayal of Eva is very clearly a child, and yet, the image of her is subtly eroticized.

In comparison, many other portrayals of little Eva are nowhere near as eroticized. Edwin Longsden Long's 1866 painting "Uncle Tom and Little Eva,"[57] portrays the titular Eva reading the Bible to a group of enslaved adults, including Uncle Tom himself. A bright light illuminates her, drawing attention to her light, youthful features and the cross necklace she wears. Along with this cross, she wears a voluminous white gown, which obscures every inch of her child's body except for her face and hands. This portrayal of little Eva is clearly a child, a symbol of white, Christian purity and innocence, and is devoid of any markers of sexuality. In this image, Long emphasizes Eva's whiteness above all. A specialist in Orientalist genre paintings, Long incorporated many of those elements in this painting. Eva, for example, sits on what appears to be a leopard skin rug, while the enslaved people around her all wear draped, revealing, pseudo-African apparel. The Black characters are completely shrouded in darkness, while Eva is illuminated by a bright light. In this image, it is clear that Eva's whiteness and purity are inextricably linked, and both are an invaluable part of her childlike innocence. Little Eva, then, was not always an erotic figure; in fact, she was almost certainly not in most forms of media, save this advertisement of Mary Marsh. What, then, are we to make of this image of Mary Marsh? It is clearly an advertisement, but was the audience really so receptive to sexualized images of children?

Indeed, many audience members were receptive to this sexualization.The adult obsession with child actors extended beyond the stage. Many child actors had to contend with "backstage

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[57] Edwin Longsden Long, "Uncle Tom and Little Eva," oil on canvas, 1866, Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum, Bournemouth.

visitors" who wanted to meet, or even befriend, well-known child actresses. There is evidence to believe that some adults regarded these children as idols or celebrities. A writer by the pen name of "Wild Olive," in defending child acting in *Our Young Folks' Weekly Budget,* says the child actress is "the idol of the call-boy, the pride of the master-carpenter, the object of the super's deep respect, yet it does not spoil her."[58] Even on stage, she is "an angel to the hapless wretch that is unsteady in his own lines."[59] Here, Wild Olive suggests that the value of a child actress lies in her ability to inspire and uplift adult men. She is an "idol" to these adult men, acting as a moral guide and an inspiration. However, one can only wonder about the intentions of an adult man who views a child actress as his "idol."

One striking example is that of Ernest Dowson, a poet and friend of Lewis Carroll who frequently became infatuated with young girls. At the age of twenty-two, Dowson became obsessed with the six-year-old actress Minnie Terry. He collected a "Minnie Terranium [sic]" of images of the actress, and even pursued a relationship with a local eleven-year old girl who resembled her.[60] This harassment was not unknown to child actresses. Child actress Marie Walton, who played the classic role of Juliet at age thirteen, recalled being followed by a man she referred to as the "Captain." The Captain would show up to her plays, exchange pleasantries with her family, and talk to his "little one" about the future he was sure they were destined to share together. The Captain died suddenly, putting an end to this uncomfortable flirtation, but for other child actresses, there wasn't such an easy escape.[61]

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[58] "The Stage-Child," *Our Young Folk's Weekly Budget*, June 25, 1887.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Varty, *Children and Theatre,* 58.

[61] Ibid., 64.

One uncomfortable dynamic in the relationship of child actresses and their audiences was the assumption that child actresses were already somewhat adult. In *Familiar Chats with the Queens of the Stage*, a series of profiles and interviews with famous actresses by Alfred Cohen, the author talks about a meeting with child actress Gertie Homan. Gertie Homan was not yet eight years old at the time of the interview's publication in 1890, yet she had first gained fame at the age of six, performing in plays such as "Little Lord Fauntleroy" and "The Burglar." Alfred Cohen, better known as Alan Dale, was a theater critic and interviewer. Upon first meeting Gertie Homan, Cohen described her as a "little maiden" who was "waiting for me at the top of the stairs," calling her a "fragile, winsome little thing" with a "halo" of hair and "the most lustrous eyes I have ever seen."[62] At one point, upon viewing a photograph of the actress and her sisters, the author determined that Gertie, the youngest, was "the prettiest of the lot" and eventually became "lost in admiration of the pretty domestic photograph." It is important to note here that Victorian culture surrounding "child-love" differed from later centuries. It was perfectly acceptable to compliment children on their physical appearance, collect pictures of particularly charming children, and to write poetry and prose about the beauty of children. Nonetheless, this masked a very pervasive culture of pedophilia. As Catherine Robson argued in *Men in Wonderland,* even though the "Cult of the Child" conceptualized girlhood as an innocent, escapist fantasy, there still existed a sexual element to many adult men's obsessions with young girls. [63]

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[62] Alan Dale, *Familiar Chats,* 322.

[63] Catherine Robson, *Men in Wonderland,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 2001.

Like many child actors, Gertie Homan's main audience was adults. She was popular, especially with other actors, and she kept a scrapbook of autographs and letters from adult actors she worked with, including poems and compliments on her beauty and talent. In 1891, as she toured the country, newspapers described her as a "little beauty" [64] and she played sold-out performances of "Little Lord Fauntleroy" alongside another seven-year-old as her "leading lady".[65] Indeed, it was not merely Gertie's talent and childlike innocence that caught the attention of adults. An article in the Daily Alta California, dated to August 10, 1888, quotes the leader of her theater company as saying "She is a wonderful little woman - yes, little woman - for six years of age." Alfred Cohen, in his interview, noted that she had a "perfectly self-possessed manner," even shaking his hand, despite that fact that she wasn't "even eight years old yet."[66] Cohen noted that she "spoke with the assurance of a woman" and eventually "resolved to talk to her just as though she were full-fledged."[67] Nonetheless, the author's description of her youth and small stature — he notes that she had a doll "almost as big as herself" and she, herself, appeared the size of a doll in comparison to her sister — suggests a clear awareness of her status as a child.

The idea of child actors as half-child and half-adult was indeed pervasive in the late 19th century press. According to children's literature scholar Marah Gubar, many thought of child actors as "liminal figures: part child, part adult,"[68] and this liminality was often erotic for

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[64] "The California," *Daily Alta California,* Vol. 84, No. 3., 13 January 1891.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Dale, "Familiar Chats," 323.

[67] Ibid., 324

[68] Gubar, "Who Watched the Children's Pinafore?", 416.

audiences of all ages. This tendency was true in reviews of Gubar's area of study, *The Children's Pinafore.* One reviewer noted that the actress who played the role of Little Buttercup had "a woman's voice with a child's face," and that the young boy who played Dick Deadeye had "an old head upon young shoulders."[69] However, this comparison also extended to offstage interactions with child actors. One Boston newspaper contains a story of an adult man meeting a child actress on the street by chance. Her name was Olive Homans (no relation to Gertie Homan), a young girl, famous for the role of Little Lord Fauntleroy. The writer noted that she exuded "the oddest mixture of babyhood and maturity that I ever met."[70]

One may note that many of these child idols, girls in particular, got their start as Little Lord Fauntleroy, or similar characters. The fact that so many famous child actresses started out playing masculine roles is no small matter. The "boy-girls" Whitman observed and the many "Little Lord Fauntleroys" were part of a much larger trend. Lewis Carroll even wrote to a friend on crossdressing in children's theater, stating that "Girls make charming boys (e.g. Little Lord Fauntleroy) but boys should never be dressed as girls."[71] Shauna Vey argues that it "seems unlikely that many spectators would have eroticized the body under the robe," and historian Jim Davis suggested that while some spectators projected "their own fantasies or desires" on crossdressing child actresses, they merely mistook "premature adulthood, social maturity, and professionalism for sexuality."[72] However, other scholars such as theater scholar Elizabeth Reitz Mullenix, have concluded that crossdressed roles, or "breeched" roles for girls and women,

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[69] Gubar, "Who Watched the Children's Pinafore?", 416

[70] "A Street Scene." *Mahogany Tree*, October 8,1892.

[71] Varty, *Children and Theatre,* 48.

[72] Vey, *Childhood and Nineteenth-Century American Theater,* 103.

"feminized, infantilized, and sexualized the crossdressed actress." [73] Since known "child-lovers" such as Lewis Carroll and Ernest Dowson fixated on portrayals of young girls in boys' clothing, it is clear that crossdressing held some sexual connotations for audience members. Perhaps because they blurred the boundaries between gender, such a fixed boundary in the nineteenth century, they became all the more alluring and intriguing.

Child actresses, then, often were the targets of sexualization because adult audiences viewed them as a gray area between binary categorizations of identity. They could appear as male or female, and were equally sexualized as Little Eva or Little Lord Fauntleroy. They could play white characters, especially symbols of white childhood innocence and purity, as well as overtly sexualized and Orientalized characters of color. Most importantly, they appeared to their audience to be "half adult" and "half child." They often worked with adults, performed for adults, and performed the roles of adult actors, yet they were very distinctly children. In this way, Victorian audiences looking to find sensual pleasure in the performances of children could enjoy the whiteness, purity, normative morality, and youth of the child actors, while also allowing themselves to sexualize these actors as almost-adult, almost-non-white others.

The obsession with child actresses was often not the chaste "child-love" that critics claimed it was, but a result of sexualized advertising, an exploitative industry, and predatory adults both on and off the stage. While moral reformers often exaggerated about the licentiousness of the stage, child sexual exploitation in the theater was more real and more common than it first appears. This troubling issue went back to the very core of 19th century society.

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[73] Elizabeth Reitz Mullinex, quoted in Jeanne Klein, "Without Distinction of Age," *The Lion and the Unicorn,* 2012, 117

Child Welfare, Reform, and Child Labor Rights

Between fatal fires, aerial incidents, bouts of tuberculosis, late working conditions, and overt sexualization and abuse within the industry, one can understand why reformers so desperately wanted change. In both the United States and Great Britain, philanthropists, progressives, and children's rights activists began fighting for harsher restrictions on the employment of children in the theater industry. The battle against mistreatment of children in the theater industry was fought on both labor fronts and moral fronts. Reformers in both the United States and the United Kingdom had a similar set of goals. They both aimed to limit the age at which children could perform, introduce child acting licenses, regulate the industry to prevent accidents, overwork, and abuse, and to dissuade families of young children from pursuing the theater. Reformers on both sides of the Atlantic also focused on both physical safety and moral education, considering the two to go hand-in-hand.

In the United Kingdom, the discussion of child cruelty hit a new era in the 1880s. The 1880s marked some of the foremost achievements in the realm of child protection, such as the 1885 publication of W.T. Stead's "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon," and the 1889 passing of the Prevention of Cruelty to, and Protection of Children Act. These victories were the culmination of more than a decades worth of campaigning for legislation against child abuse and exposés on child abuse in the United Kingdom. One of the most famous of these was the 1884 exposé *Pantomime Waifs,* penned by activist and writer Ellen Barlee. With this inflammatory pamphlet*,* Ellen Barlee created a genuine wave of panic over the treatment of children working in the entertainment industry. Ellen Barlee, a philanthropist and reformer, undertook a comprehensive study of the conditions of child acrobats, dancers, circus performers, and actors,

with a particular focus on those working in the pantomime. As the subtitle suggested, the focus was also on city children. As most major theaters employing children were in major metropolitan areas, it is understandable why reformers would fixate so keenly on these urban centers. However, the focus on urban "waifs," sometimes disdainfully called "street Arabs," also reveals a sense of discomfort with urban life in general. According, to historian Christopher Bischof, this panic was in part because of the physical demands of acting, as readers were struck by the "child acrobats forced by adults to contort their limbs for hours" and the "figure of the child acrobat who was caused physical pain by her performance for adults"[74] However, Bischof also notes that towards the end of the century — when child theater reform became a real factor — child advocates began to consider the moral education of abused children:

> Early and mid-Victorian social reformers and philanthropists had focused on protecting children from physical abuse, deliberate starvation and other forms of active, malicious abuse. However, in the 1880s, 'cruelty' was coming to include neglecting a child, providing them with an unwholesome environment, or even adopting a mercenary attitude towards them. The Liverpool branch of the SPCC's definition of cruelty to children included 'any employment by which the powers of the children are overtaxed', and neglecting to provide anything that reasonably contributed to the 'well-being of a child.[75]

The very idea of children as a commodity became a source for moral panic. If the image of childhood could be bought and sold, why not children themselves? The employment of children

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[74] Bischof, Christaopher.. "A 'Rich Crop of Nervousness," *The English Historical Review* 131, no. 553, 2016, 1423.

[75] Ibid.

in the theater was one of the foremost examples of the commodification of children, and therefore became a primary source of controversy. The battle against child acting became not only a battle against physical abuse, but against the moral degradation of young children.

Philanthropists such as Barlee approached the dual issues of sexualization and physical hazard as a shared danger, stemming from the same source. It was, after all, reformers believed that it was because of their skimpy and extravagant outfits that so many young actress succumbed to fire, temperature fluctuations, and increased illness. Many reformers also believed the children's physical weakness allowed them to be more easily preyed upon. One may recall Annette Bear's story of the seven-year-old actress who was almost sexually assaulted on three occasions while walking home alone with swollen ankles. To these reforms, the physical and moral well-being of stage children — particularly stage girls — went hand-in-hand.

Pantomime Waifs not only caused a moral panic, but a literary trend. The British fiction market began to overflow with books about the tribulations of child actors. Books such as *The Child Acrobat* and *Behind the Curtains* began to crop up in the literary world. Many of these books contained sensationalist accounts of children burning to death, dying in acrobatic stunts, becoming alcoholics, and freezing to death on the streets after being turned out of theaters. In some ways, they attempted to raise awareness about the conditions within the theater. In other ways, they served to replicate the fetishization of childhood pain. Just as the theater made a profit off of the real and depicted suffering and death of children, so did these allegedly reformist novels.

The panic over children in the theater did, in fact, lead to some significant change. The Principal Act of 1889, known as the Children's Charter, allowed for child abuse of various types

to become a prosecutable offense. This law allowed for a crackdown on child labour in the United Kingdom. In 1894, the law was extended to children in the entertainment industry. No child under the age of seven could sing, dance, or act on stage, and children between seven and eleven had to be licensed. The law generated a great deal of backlash in the theater world. One critical article in *The London Stage,* in 1894, noted that the restrictions were "so sufficiently bad — so bad, indeed, that it will lead managers to only employ children more than eleven years old."[76] Theater company employers might have viewed this as a hindrance, but to child welfare reforms it was a great moral victory.

In the United States, this type of reform began in the 1870s, but reached the highest point of public debate in the late 1890s and early 1900s. While the United States implemented laws against child labor and child abuse at a later time, American child protection reformers were ahead of their British counterparts. At this time, Elbridge T. Gerry (mentioned earlier) was the foremost voice against child labor in the theater industry. Gerry, nicknamed "Commodore" Gerry, was a prominent lawyer in New York City and the grandson of James Madison's Vice President, also named Elbridge Gerry. He is best known as the founder of the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty Towards Children, often called the Gerry Society, as well as the foremost advocate of the 1876 Act to Prevent and Punish Wrongs to Children.[77] Historian John E.B. Myers calls the NYSPCC the "world's first organization devoted entirely to child protection,"[78] and indeed, at its founding in 1875, the NYSPCC was a trailblazing organization.

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[76] Stage Children and the Law, *The Stage,* November 22, 1894.

[77] Vey, *Childhood and the Nineteenth-Century American Theater,* 118

[78] Myers John E.B. "A Short History of Child Protection in America." *Family Law Quarterly* 42, no. 3, 2008, 449.

Before the founding of the NYSPCC, there were no federal laws concerning child abuse, and only Massachusetts had state laws against child neglect. While there were individual cases of prosecution against abusive parents and child sexual abusers, there was no legislation specifically to protect children from abuse.[79] By 1876, the Act to Prevent and Punish Wrongs to Children was passed in New York State, thus "forbid[ding] the use, exhibition or employment of children under sixteen, in street singing, and certain other services," and making such employment a misdemeanor.[80] The NYSPCC could now prosecute theater managers and parents who employed children in the entertainment industry.

Gerry was determined, but he was unpopular, especially amongst theater professionals. In 1892, theater managers in New York State introduced a bill to allow children to act on stage without the permission of the NYSPCC, and in 1895, a group introduced a similar bill to allow them to sing and dance. Gerry vehemently opposed the two bills, both of which eventually passed, arguing that they would destroy children's livelihoods and moralities. Newspapers such as the New York Times and the Chicago Daily Tribune lampooned him for his moralism, outrage, and seemingly repetitive arguments. By the early 1900s, Gerry's name was synonymous with the over policing of the theater industry. The Washington Post published a piece in 1904 claiming that "The Gerries" were "Worse than the Measles. "[81] In this piece, a special correspondent interviewed famous stage children to better understand their world, with a particular focus on a stage mother by the name of Mrs. Anna Taliaferro and her daughters. The author concluded that:

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[79] Myers, "Child Protection in America"

[80] Section 1, The Act to Prevent and Punish Wrongs to Children, passed April 14, 1876.

[81] Special Correspondence of The Sunday Post, "Child Actor Market: Little Stage Men and Women and their Exchange," *The Washington Post*, April 17, 1904.

> To infantile stage applicants the Gerry Society is a great ogre, lurking in wait to pounce upon and devour them. They do not know what it is except that it is awful. They have heard mothers mention the Gerry Society as a fearful something that might put an abrupt end to their ambitions. They refer to it in bated breath; in the dark they do not mention it at all. If any one told them this society was meant to do them good, they would think he was a lunatic. Most of them refer to the Society as "The Gerries." A spectator at one of Mrs. Taliaferro's gatherings once remarked that he would have thought from the way they said the word that "The Gerries"was some sort of contagious disease.[82]

Stage parents and managers consistently lied to "The Gerries," making their approval ineffective. One anecdote goes that, if asked one's age, a stage child would reply "Five for the street car conductor, seven for mamma, and ten for 'The Gerries.'"[83] Here, the author is comedically showing that many families in the theater industry believed the Gerry Society hindered, rather than helped, their children. However, this article also shows how there were loopholes that rendered the Gerry Society relatively ineffectual.

Like the British reformers, the Gerry Society was equally interested in the moral well-being of children as well as their physical well-being. Interestingly, part of the NYSPCC's goal was not only to protect children, but to protect the sexual mores of the time. Historian Stephen Robertson notes "that most sodomy prosecutions in New York City in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were undertaken by the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NYSPCC) and occurred "in the course of its more general campaign to protect the

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[82]"Child Actor Market," *The Washington Post*, April 17, 1904.

[83] Ibid.

city's children from assault."[84] Robertson also notes that the NYSPCC was responsible for prosecuting statutory rape offenses and raising the age of consent in New York State. Despite their alleged labour focus, the NYSPCC was still focused on sexual offenses against children and sexual impropriety in general. To Gerry, sexual propriety and physical well-being went hand in hand. Gerry claimed that when children were engaged in song and dance in the theater industry, "you destroy their voices and their modesty."[85] That is to say, the theater industry damaged children three times over: it destroyed their physical voices by overuse, destroyed their metaphorical "voices" by silencing them, and destroyed any sense of modesty or propriety.

By the late 1890s and early 1900s, the fight against child acting had spread to Chicago. Reformers such as Jane Addams denounced the theater trade's "Evil Effects on the Family"[86] and began to hold conferences for child welfare that explicitly called for limitations on child labour in the theater industry.[87] However, such reforms only really reached urban centers such as New York City and Chicago. While child abuse and the employment of child actors could be prosecuted on a state level, most states had no such laws against these practices. Therefore, for a child to continue acting, one only had to leave the state. As the acting industry began to move westward, the problem of child acting was never mitigated; it merely migrated. Shauna Vey notes

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84 Robertson, Stephen. "Shifting the Scene of the Crime: Sodomy and the American History of Sexual Violence." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19, no. 2, May 2010.

85 "Opposed by Commodore Gerry: His Reasons for Objecting to Mr. Friday's Bill to Allow Stage Children to Dance and Sing," *The New York Times*, Apr 17, 1895.

86 "Stage Child the Subject of Debate." *New York Times*, December 6, 1901.

87 Ibid.

that child actors were only afforded the same rights and working conditions as their adult counterparts in 1938 — almost one hundred years after the death of Mary Marsh.[88]

In both the United States and the United Kingdom, moral reformers and children's welfare advocates worked tirelessly against overwork, sexual exploitation, endangerment, and commodification of child actors. While shared Anglo-American sexual morality led to similar fights against this industry, they came to very different conclusions. To truly understand why, one needs to understand the developments in the workforce in both countries. By the late 19th century and early twentieth century, the United States was already developing a cottage industry in film, which perhaps explains the hesitance to regulate child actors. After all, regulating the theater would perhaps lead to regulation in the film studio. There is also a marked difference in the labor markets and cultures of labor organizing in both countries. The United Kingdom had already begun to limit child labor with the Factory Act of 1833 and the Mines Act of 1842. However, the United States only outlawed child labor in 1934 — an entire century after the United Kingdom's first attempts to limit child labor. While the reformers and the trailblazers in the United States began their struggle against child acting earlier, they were not able to meet with as much success as their British counterparts. In some ways, both movements represent a microcosm of the British and American labor movements. British labor movements were able to succeed on a national level much sooner than American labor movements, however, American reformers were innovative and strident nonetheless.

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[88] Vey, *Childhood and Nineteenth-Century American Theater,* 152.

Conclusion

The persistence of child acting is one of the most paradoxical and troubling aspects of the nineteenth century Anglo-American theater. Throughout the century, thousands of children were employed as dancers, opera singers, pantomime actors, aerialists, and virtually every other role in the entertainment industry. Despite the dangers of the job, child acting continued to be an enormous industry in the 20th century, but its character distinctly changed in the light of new child labor and protection laws in the 1870s and 1880s. Nonetheless, child laborers in the entertainment industry continued to languish under difficult and often abusive conditions.

So what happened to these child actors? Stories vary. Some, like Ellen Terry, became professional actors, and some led very successful careers. Louise Arnot, of the Marsh Troupe, continued to act well into her middle age, and ended up comfortably retiring on a farm in Pennsylvania.[89] Some, like Gertie Homan, remained in the industry in a different capacity, but ceased to act. Gertie Homan eventually married Edwin Thanhouser, of the Thanhouser Company film studio, and became a screenwriter, editor, and studio executive. The unrelated Olive Homans met a much sadder end, dying at the age of eighteen from an asthma attack.

While the worlds of theater differed in Great Britain and the United States, the similarities between the two nations are striking. Both nations employed a great deal of children for the entertainment of children and adults alike, often working-class or middle-class children who had few options to make a living. Girls in the industry in particular faced sexualization, low wages, overwork, and a higher rate of injury and accident. Both countries faced a troubling and damning problem — their societies were willing to allow children, especially girls, to work

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[89] Vey, *Childhood and Nineteenth-Century American Theater,* 113.

themselves to the bone and face injury, assault, or even death for the sake of adults' entertainment.

In both the United States and the United Kingdom, the bodies of child actors carried the same connotations. Their physical well-being and moral well-being were inextricably linked. As the definition of abuse changed to encompass not just physical abuse but moral decay and economic exploitation. To reformers, the deaths of young actresses in fires were linked to their scanty and over-the-top outfits, and their sexual exploitation was linked to their economic dependency and weakened physical state. Moral and physical state were one and the same. One can trace this back to shared Anglo-American Protestant morals.

However, reform began in the United States at an earlier stage than in Great Britain, but was less successful overall. This could be due to the developing film industry of the time, as well as the difference in American and British labor markets. An article in 1937 — three years after the United States cracked down on the child acting industry — noted that "Great Britain began almost fifty years before the United States to make child labor legislation really effective."[90] While the United States began campaigning earlier, Great Britain was able to implement effective laws earlier. Part of this difference may be due to the fact that most United States reforms only worked at a state level. The laws the SPCC campaigned for were just as effective as their British counterparts, but they only covered child actors in New York state. Simply because of the way labor laws work on a state versus a federal level in the United States, it was much harder for American reformers to make overarching reforms.

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90 "Child Labor: Great Britain and the United States," Social Service Review 11, no. 3, University of Chicago Press, September 1937.

Finally, the bodies of child actors, particularly child actresses, carried complicated dual meanings. White children could simultaneously play pure, white “little Eva” figures and minstrel characters, and could simultaneously be innocent white “waifs” and amoral “street Arabs.” Many of the children were working class children imitating higher class and middle class norms — the cash-strapped children of actors often played the aristocratic Little Lord Fauntleroy. Furthermore, child actresses in particular occupied a complicated place amongst gender lines. Oftentimes, they would portray figures of exaggerated femininity — fairies, sylphs, and princesses — but they would often play traditionally male roles, crossdressing as Little Lord Fauntleroy or Romeo. Of course, the most striking binary these children defied — or appeared to defy — was that of age. To adult viewers in the nineteenth century, these children were both adult and child. They were physically children, and embodied the innocence and artlessness that 19th century viewers associated with their youth. However, they often portrayed adult roles, performed for adults, and worked alongside adults. Many adults, therefore, viewed these children as precocious, mature, and somewhat knowing. The double identity of child and adults, innocent yet mature, was one of the greater subconscious justifications for the rampant sexualization of stage children and the cruelty of their jobs.

Furthermore, child actors were able to transgress conventional categorizations of identity, leading to further abuse and sympathy. The nineteenth century was an era obsessed with binaries and boundaries. In inhabiting liminal spaces between these binary poles, child actors became a source of excitement, intrigue, arousal, and concern. The struggles of nineteenth century child actors in the Anglosphere reveal the tenuous position of childhood innocence in nineteenth century thought. Many nineteenth century thinkers -- whether conservative, reformist, or

otherwise — viewed children as inherently innocent, and believed that children should never be commodified. The commodification and sexualization of child actors forced nineteenth century audiences to reconcile the discrepancies in their own perceptions of childhood, making it such an uncomfortable, and yet alluring profession.

As a qualifier, it is important to remember that the story of nineteenth century child actors is still incomplete. The stories of children of color who participated in “”exotic” road shows and “pickaninny” touring companies has mostly gone untold. Unlike white children, they did not receive the same amount of moral outrage; while the reforms applied equally to them, in theory, they were rarely the intended targets of the protections enacted. Furthermore, child performers off the stage, such as street musicians and dancers, also received much less attention from the reformist press, partially because they were often of an even lower economic level than stage children. The conventional story of nineteenth century child actors is only a partial story, and will remain so until more research is put into these lesser-known victims of the juvenile entertainment industry.

The plight of child actors shows how nineteenth century childhood was never a neutral concept. Childhood innocence was tenuous and depended on the race, class, gender, and earning capability of a child. By occupying multiple classifications at once, child actors went directly against Victorian standards of binaries and categorization. This transgression was perhaps the reason why child actors were the subjects of abuse, fascination, and sympathy. Child actors raised more questions than they answered, and continue to do so.

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