

“The Queering of Age” in Victorian Literature

Precocious Children & Childish Adults: Age Inversion in Victorian Literature. Claudia Nelson. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012. 211 pp.

Reviewed by [Virginia Zimmerman](#), Bucknell University

<1>Claudia Nelson begins *Precocious Children & Childish Adults* with the truism that “the Victorians were fascinated by childhood” (1), and she promptly observes that there was also a partner interest in old age. It is Nelson’s project to examine how these categories were confounded. She writes, “This book focuses on ... the rhetorical tendency of that era, especially evident in fiction, to liken adults to children and children to adults” (3). There is an almost mathematical precision to this statement and to the sequence of chapters, which move through the expected inversions, such as women as girls and girls as women; however, the simple statement of argument with which Nelson begins only hints at the nuanced and fascinating depiction of the destabilization of age categories which she will unfold throughout the book.

<2>Nelson presents what she aptly calls “the queering of age” (11). Like the breakdown of gender categories, categories of age, she posits, should also be seen as tenuous. She argues that the frequent appearance of terms like “old-fashioned child” and “child woman” reveals that the Victorians were interested in “generational border crossings” (3), and she shows how “the dismantling of chronological age is frequently a way of tracking power or its loss” (4). When she connects queered age to power, Nelson contributes to a growing discourse that moves the study of age from the margins of critical consideration to the center of Victorian studies.

<3>Entering into conversation with scholars like Marah Gubar, Karen Chase, and Catherine Robson,⁽¹⁾ whose recent work similarly complicates age, Nelson reveals how “childhood” was an unstable category for the Victorians. In *Precocious Children & Childish Adults* Nelson offers a robust contribution to an emerging discourse that demonstrates how the representation of age in the nineteenth century is intimately linked to many other concerns, such as gender, class, and empire. With Robson and Gubar, Nelson breaks down the categories that would hold children’s studies as a thing apart. She quickly persuades her reader that her examination of “childish adults” and “precocious children” gets at the heart of many central concerns of Victorian studies.

<4>In the first chapter, Nelson focuses on the old-fashioned child in domestic novels. She takes the label from an article by Frederic Adye titled “Old-Fashioned Children,” which appeared in

Macmillan's in 1893, and she explains how she begins her study with "children explicitly termed *old-fashioned*" (13: emphasis in the original). Considering such children as Paul Dombey from Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (1846-48) and Sara Crewe from Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess* (1905), she examines how the old-fashioned child is a product of the conjunction of contradictory elements such as innocence and industry, sensitivity and coldness, or outsider and insider. These contradictions make these children figures of discomfort: sometimes they are themselves uncomfortable with their vexed positions; sometimes they evoke discomfort in readers. In both cases, Nelson reads these children burdened with uncomfortable dualities as uncanny, in a Freudian sense. In her exploration of these uncanny children, Nelson reveals an instability at the heart of domestic fiction, an instability that calls into question the domestic ideal as well as assumptions about age, gender, and authority. Nelson argues that old-fashioned children frequently reveal failures in parenting, but it is clear that they reveal larger social failings as well.

<5>In the next two chapters, Nelson discusses arrested child-men and child-women, respectively. Unlike old-fashioned children, who are child characters, these are adults who behave childishly. Nelson gives examples in both chapters of characters who are admired for their rejection of adult sexuality, but she also shows how both child-men and child-women can be seen as pathological figures associated with atavism. Some child-men may be harmless, Nelson argues; indeed, their rejection of adult sexuality is part of their appeal. Characters like David Copperfield, Dickens's titular character (1849-50), eventually grow up and assume the responsibilities and desires of adulthood, but others, such as Jenny Wren's father in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65), eschew adult responsibilities. Of these child-men, Nelson writes, "A man who rejects the responsibilities of the masculine gender role, it seems, commits an act of violence against society" (55). Certainly, a man's abdication of social power leaves a void, which may be problematically filled by a woman or a child. In either case, the natural order is disrupted.

<6>In contrast, some child-women seem to reinforce the natural order. Nelson asserts that the stasis implicit in a woman who is arrested just short of achieving sexual maturity represents, for the Victorians, an idealized femininity. These idealized child-women are, ironically, subjects of desire and are often the focus of the male gaze. Even female characters in such anthropological fantasies as *Ayesha: The Return of She* (1905) and *The Time Machine* (1895) are embodiments of an ideal of atavism, a quality that these novels endorse for women, but see as an aberration for men. However, Nelson goes on to complicate the child-woman, showing that she is not always an ideal or that she may sometimes pose a challenge to the ideal. As an example, she offers Lady Audley, from Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), who is willing to commit murder to preserve her child-like façade. The sensational element of the novel is born out of the doubleness of this character: Lady Audley is an innocent and a criminal at once. Similarly, Nelson describes how the childlike New Woman embodies the two sides of a debate about gender identity: some view her as the solution to a variety of social problems, such as prostitution, while some view her asexual nature as an aberration just like that of the child-man.

<7>In the next set of chapters, Nelson turns to children who behave as adults, precocious child-men and child-women. While she gives one chapter to females and one to males, these characters may also be divided, as she observes, along class lines. Working-class children of both genders

may be forced into precocity by financial need, often exacerbated by the failure of an adult to fulfill that need. Nelson draws examples from Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851), in which Mayhew describes many children who must perform an adult's role in the workplace. She observes that when girls assume adult roles they are generally seen as shoring up the family rather than disrupting its natural order, while the precocious child-man, though he is also associated with "fractures and vacant spaces in the family" (136), is most often considered as aggravating the dysfunction. However, working-class children of both genders are often driven to be precocious by circumstance: their assumption of adult roles is usually a response to the absence or incompetence of adults, and they most often command the reader's sympathy. The denouements of their stories may involve the return of the child to child status or the child's natural progression into an appropriate adult role.

<8>Precocious children of the privileged classes are more complicated. For instance, child-women might take on a troubling sexual role. Nelson pays particular attention to the eroticized relationship between father and daughter that may result when a daughter steps into the role of an absent wife: as examples, she offers Paulina Home from Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) as well as Sara Crewe, also offered in the first chapter as an "old-fashioned child." Nelson explains how this difficulty can be resolved when the daughter is married: her husband sees her as childlike and thus asexual in an idealized fashion, and the problematic sexual nature of the relationship with her father is dispelled when she is married. Precocious boys are rarely sexualized, but they do assume adult responsibilities uncharacteristic for their years. In her discussion of Father Time from Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895), Nelson returns to Freud's notion of the uncanny: children who step into adult roles are unsettling and reveal something wrong in their families and in their societies, too.

<9>*Precocious Children & Childish Adults* is far broader in scope than its subject would lead one to expect: Nelson finds in the instability of age categories, what she calls "generational colonization" (106), a topic that brings together gender, class, race, and empire, major concerns of Victorian studies. In her conclusion, "The Adult Reader as Child," Nelson makes an unexpected but compelling move beyond the bounds of text. She adopts a metatextual approach and considers the phenomenon of adults reading children's books. Arguing that the "temporary age inversion" (165) that happens when adult readers colonize the audience of a children's book signals a larger social problem, she writes, "The phenomenon of adult fans of children's books signaled a regression to childhood that might go hand in hand with widespread social degeneration" (163). Thus the queering of age occurs not only within the pages of books, illustrating the breakdown of stable categories of culture and identity, but also in the real world inhabited by readers.

<10>In conclusion, Claudia Nelson's *Precocious Children & Childish Adults* certainly makes an important contribution to Victorian children's studies, but it also contributes more broadly to the study of gender, identity, race, class, and empire in the Victorian and Edwardian periods. Indeed, while the "queering of age" at first seems a narrow concern, Nelson quickly reveals it to be an extraordinarily useful lens through which to observe the breakdown of all sorts of categories and through which to see the entire period with new clarity.

Endnotes

(1)See Marah Gubar, *Artful Dodgers: Reconceiving the Golden Age of Children's Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Catherine Robson, *Men in Wonderland: The Lost Girlhood of the Victorian Gentleman* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Karen Chase, *The Victorians and Old Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).(^)