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CONCEPTUALIZING CRUELTY TO CHILDREN IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND: LITERATURE, REPRESENTATION, AND THE NSPCC

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Flegel’s text is part of the Ashgate Studies in Childhood series edited by Claudia Nelson that includes Dennis Denisoff’s edited collection *The Nineteenth-Century Child and Consumer Culture* and Mary Hilton’s *Women and the Shaping of the Nation’s Young: Education and Public Doctrine in Britain 1750-1850*. These books examine childhood in relation to topics such as gender, education, and consumerism. In a larger sense, Flegel’s text participates in a dialogue on childhood studies, children’s culture, and representations of childhood that has been ongoing in the work of James Kincaid (*Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture*) and Jacqueline Rose (*The Case of Peter Pan: The Impossibility of Children’s Fiction*) as well as scholarship specifically focused on childhood and the Victorian novel (Laura Berry’s *The Child, the State, and the Victorian Novel*), the plight of orphans (Lydia Murdoch’s *Imagined Orphans: Poor Families, Child Welfare, and Contested Citizenship in London*), and the Romantic child (Judith Plotz’s *Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood*). Contending that “childhood is in fact a crucial concept for understanding the Victorian period” (5), Flegel endorses Sally Shuttleworth’s assertion that age merits a place alongside race, class, and gender as a subject of critical inquiry. Flegel’s work focuses on adult representations of childhood, exploring the intersection between abused, sexualized, victimized, laboring, and criminalized child figures. Geographically, racially, and socio-economically, however, its field is limited. It focuses on children who are white, urban, and working class.
Cruelty to children emerged as a distinct legal concept only in the late-nineteenth century with the passage of the Children’s Charter in 1889, due in part to the efforts of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC). Bridging the worlds of private charity and government organization, the story of the NSPCC as Flegel tells it is one of centralization, documentation, and professionalization as it developed a specialized discourse through which to discuss child abuse and a clear methodology to investigate it. Tracing the discursive shift from case studies designed to elicit reader sympathy to social-scientific casework emphasizing evidence and procedure, Flegel adopts a useful cross-disciplinary approach, acknowledging the mutually constitutive interplay among literary texts, statistics, case studies, journalistic accounts, and legal documents. Representations of childhood are drawn from canonical and less well-known texts: poetry by Caroline Norton and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, social-problem novels by Dickens, Charlotte Tonna, and Frances Trollope, and non-fiction treatises on juvenile delinquency by Mary Carpenter, child prostitution by W.T. Stead, and urban poverty as framed in Henry Mayhew’s work. Flegel connects these representations to government reports and articles from The Child’s Guardian that sought to raise public awareness about child abuse. Examination of this broad, cross-genre body of work enables Flegel to trace the development of “child protection as a discourse and as a practice” (12).

Flegel presents the evolution of legal discourse about the child as abused subject and as laborer in the wake of changing ideas about the social value of children and the importance of a healthy childhood as the foundation for adult life. Drawing on this range of sources, Flegel organizes her chapters around representations of the child in different contexts: the child and the
animal, the child performer, the child as victim of commerce, and the child as criminal. Though the chapter on the child and the animal is historically useful for establishing the relationship between the NSPCC and animal protection societies, it fits oddly with the other chapters since they focus on the material experiences of children as well as representations of them in these circumstances. In the other chapters, the discussion of the child as criminal may not be new to many readers, but the treatment of child performance offers fruitful ground for analysis of the stage as a site where innocence and artifice, labor and play converged. In addition, the chapter on the child and commerce engagingly studies childhood and social class in light of what Englishness meant to nineteenth-century citizens. It came to mean de-commercializing the home. While the NSPCC aimed to construe child abuse as a classless crime to avoid criminalizing working-class families who often relied upon child wage earners, the brouhaha over child life insurance as a possible source of income for impoverished families revealed “deep-rooted fears about the lower classes” (146). Contextualizing these fears within a broader economic context in which the nation as a whole consumed the labor of the poor, Flegel argues that England’s two core values—happy homes and successful commerce—worked against each other. They could co-exist, she maintains, only if “the domestic and the economic spaces” were clearly separated (120).

One site where these values collided was the theater, a space of play but as Flegel contends, a workplace for the child performer, a “vexed figure” who straddled “the world of fancy, imagination, and pleasure, and on the other, the world of commerce, training and labor” (73). Building on Brenda Assael’s work on the Victorian circus, Flegel seeks to answer a vexed question: since a rigidly trained professional entertainer clearly differs from a playful child,
could child performance be codified (and subsequently protected) in the same way as factory labor? In both workplaces, children were thought to be facing moral dangers while laboring under the casual supervision of strangers whose immoral or unhealthy behavior endangered the child. Furthermore, since evangelical novels classified child performance as artifice, the audience as well the performers needed saving lest they be “seduced by the pleasure of its performance” (99). Here it is helpful to recall Jacqueline Rose’s assertion that discursive representations or performances of childhood and innocence are driven by the needs and nostalgias of adult audiences, dramatists, or promoters.

Flegel clarifies the complexity and delicacy of the issue and history of abuse. Following James Kincaid’s foundational work on representations of child sexuality, Flegel shows that in texts by Dickens, Mayhew, and W.T. Stead, street children are split by gender into girl prostitutes and boy pickpockets. This division, Flegel contends, enables men like Oliver Twist’s Mr. Brownlow to be read as Oliver’s rescuer and benefactor. Since Dickens treats prostitution as a strictly female vice, we are asked to assume that Brownlow cannot be a pederast. In the world outside the nineteenth-century novel, however, adults could be protective or abusive and sometimes both simultaneously. The NSPCC did support parental disciplinary practices, distinguishing “the ill-behaved child (who, it believed, deserved corporal punishment) and the abused child, whose ill-treatment was either unrelated to any action of the child, or a response far in excess of any wrong committed by the child” (69). In drawing out this distinction, Flegel contrasts representations of virtuous children in literary discourse (e.g., Oliver Twist, Little Nell, and Dickey Parrott) with those styled as insolent, sadistic, or violent (e.g., Noah Claypole or the Artful Dodger). Tracing the changing perceptions of child criminals from the 1790s onward,
Flegel connects the rise of reformatories for juvenile offenders to beliefs about the child’s salvation and mid-nineteenth century beliefs about the corruptive influence of adult offenders.

By the start of the twentieth century, Flegel concludes, “the story of the endangered child had become the story of the child as institutional subject: of the child represented and caught up within … institutions such as the NSPCC and legislation such as the ‘Children’s Charter’” (181). A good resource work for students and scholars, Flegel’s text is accessible and lucid, offering some useful close readings within a historical context and interpretive framework. It could serve as a critical companion to studies of poverty, urban spaces, or delinquency.

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