

Marah Gubar

ARTFUL DODGERS: RECONCEIVING THE GOLDEN AGE OF CHILDREN'S

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Reviewed by James Eli Adams.

The fantasy of childhood as a pre-lapsarian realm, a world of experience untroubled by the perplexities of adult life, has been subjected to withering skepticism for more than a century. Yet its continuing power is familiar to any college teacher of children's literature. Students who enroll in courses on the subject frequently end up echoing Wordsworth's lament that we murder to dissect: the mere act of analyzing the material seems a form of desecration, a willful destruction of innocence.

The idea of children as "a race apart," embodiments of idyllic, primitive simplicity uncorrupted by adult convention and experience, is epitomized for many readers by the so-called "Golden Age" of British children's literature, from roughly 1850 to 1914. Accordingly, that same literature has been the focus of more skeptical critics, most influentially Jacqueline Rose (in *Peter Pan and the Impossibility of Children's Literature* [1984]), who contends that children's literature works mainly to gratify adult fantasies, conjuring up a world of innocence that assuages adult anxieties about language, sexuality, and identity. Far from a sympathetic appeal to the needs and desires of children, Rose argues, children's literature rests on an "impossible" disjunction between the writer and the object of address.

In *Artful Dodgers: Reconceiving the Golden Age of Children's Literature*, Marah Gubar powerfully reconsiders both “the cult of the child” and Rose’s critique of it. Golden Age children’s authors, she contends, were generally skeptical about images of childhood associated with Romantic primitivism, and they rarely present children as incarnations of a freedom somehow immune to social mediation. On the contrary, Gubar argues, their works were centrally concerned with the complexities of children’s agency, “acknowledging the pervasive and potentially coercive power of adult influence while nevertheless entertaining the possibility that children can be enabled and inspired by their inevitable inheritance” (5). Rose’s criticism, Gubar pointedly notes, not only overlooks this complexity, but gestures towards an image of children strangely akin to the innocence it purports to demystify. In Rose’s view, “children’s fiction draws in the child, it secures, places and frames the child” (Rose 2), but this stance, Gubar rejoins, treats children as “helpless pawns in the hand of all-powerful adults” (31). Rose’s stance is widely echoed in contemporary criticism that treats children’s literature as a field of domination, a world in which children are somehow “colonized” by adults. But Golden Age children’s literature, Gubar argues, more often represents a many-faceted *collaboration* between children and adults—a concept that motivates her appropriation of Dickens’s phrase, “artful dodger.” Collaboration is of course far more equivocal than colonization, but therein lies much of its force as an analytic frame for this literature. It rebukes constructions of childhood as profoundly pre-social but also points to childhood experience as a complex negotiation with adult power and authority.

Gubar’s study begins by enlarging the scope of most treatments of Golden Age children’s literature. While those treatments frequently overlook popular women writers of the period, it

was women writers who most keenly experienced the burdens of socialization, and who typically embed their characters in a dense web of domestic relations, with attendant constraints on a child's agency. Gubar's analyses of a host of neglected writers—Julia Ewing, Mary Louisa Molesworth, Hesba Stretton, Frances Crompton—shows that this emphasis (*pace* Rose) brought with it a new attention to questions of address, which is reflected in the rise of the child narrator. Many recent critics have seen this device as an especially efficient ruse of power, but Gubar's analysis of the neglected Julia Ewing brings home a less cynical view: far from encouraging an untrammelled identification with adult norms, Ewing and other writers often prod the reader into an ongoing questioning of them. Thus in *We and the World* Ewing rewrites colonial adventure in a way that undermines the dominant conventions of the genre, and with them the allure of empire, as her hero comes to sense that “the fantasy of male potency that writers like Kingston peddle is a snare and a delusion” (66). The reader's awareness of literary convention is even more central in the better-known works of E. Nesbit, where children become adepts at “appropriating or recycling the work of adult authors” (168), a collaboration wryly imagined as a form of burglary or “reciprocal robbery.”

“Collaboration” has a more tenuous purchase in Gubar's analysis of *Alice in Wonderland*, where, as she puts it, “Carroll dramatizes the plight of the child bombarded by other people's discourse” (123), and a child's autonomy is reduced to what she calls “reciprocal aggression”: saying no to other people's stories (98). Although Gubar shrewdly notes that Alice remains a relatively unresistant reader—her aggression is tightly leashed—this chapter surprises less than the others, in part because it emphasizes a negative framing of the book's main thesis: Alice is not a “Child of Nature.” There may be die-hards still reluctant to concede this, but most readers

will not be surprised to hear that Alice, far from being a “blank slate,” is thoroughly socialized, always already “a scripted being.”

The oppositional structure has a more distorting effect elsewhere in the study, where it can encourage the discovery of an over-insistent moralism. This seemed to me especially notable in Gubar’s reading of *Treasure Island*. This chapter convincingly and significantly rescues Stevenson’s novel from easy alignment with the imperialist energies of boys’ adventure, which again cuts against the grain of most recent criticism. In the process, however, Gubar proffers a confident didacticism of another stripe, which seems to me alien to Stevenson’s art. She calls the work an “anti-adventure,” which affirms a relatively simple oppositional structure, allowing no space for another possibility: that Stevenson’s story offers a wryly self-conscious and deeply ambivalent anatomy of the conventions of the genre—a sort of meta-adventure, if one likes. Tellingly, Gubar discovers a related ambivalence in the cult of child actors at the end of the century, but here she is constrained by resistance to readings of *Treasure Island* as “an energizing myth of Empire” (70), a framework that precludes much appeal to ambivalence. (Who wants to confess to finding Empire even slightly alluring?) But ambivalence seems absolutely central to Stevenson’s romance. The work anatomizes the unsettling association of manhood with untrammelled aggression, which organizes adventure stories through the complicity of hero and outlaw—a complicity brilliantly epitomized in the figure of Long John Silver. Silver is terrifying, but he also is fascinating in the ease with which he navigates the ostensible gulf between outlaw and gentleman, between weirdly avuncular father-figure (and spokesman for bourgeois virtues of prudence and thrift) and bloodcurdling killer. To present the story as a “cautionary tale” (71) defuses the ambivalence condensed in this character. It also

suggests an implausible understanding of the novel's address: does Stevenson address a boy more gratified by "a cautionary tale" than by the fantasy of attaining his own hardy, self-assured manhood? What reader looks to *Treasure Island* to discover "the danger of being duped by silver-tongued story-tellers" (106) or, more broadly, "a dangerous delusion" inherent in constructions of manhood? This makes Stevenson sound rather like an evangelical author of didactic tales ("reminds readers to beware the cost of succumbing to such flattery," etc [108]), which hardly accounts for the huge appeal of this story, let alone the subtleties of Stevenson's art.

It is difficult to discuss children's fiction without appealing to a didactic model, simply because ethical questions—what is right? what is fair? what is worthy?—are more overtly at issue than in fiction directed principally to adults. And of course moral pedagogy is a crucial form of collaboration between child and adult, and thus in keeping with Gubar's central concerns. But too insistent an alignment of author with moral guide—"this encounter warns children that adults who appear to be taking them seriously may be making fun of them" (176, apropos Nesbit)—always risks over-simplifying the ethical work of fiction and the child's participation in it. More narrowly, it is liable to work against a central, powerful implication of Gubar's study, that children's literature is not so broadly or tidily removed from "adult" fiction as we might imagine. If it seems simplistic to describe the agency of (say) George Eliot as the work of "warning" her readers, that might also be the case in so witty and self-conscious a writer as E. Nesbit.

In the end, though, such criticism is provoked by a book worth arguing with. *Artful Dodgers* is a lucid, informative, and stimulating work, distinctive in its subordination of deep psychology to a close and sustained attention to formal structure and social dynamics. It deserves wide attention among scholars of both Victorian and children's literature, not only for the range and acuity of its readings, but also for its reflections on critical method. As a field of academic study, children's literature is still frequently vexed by institutional and disciplinary condescension; all too often it is relegated to the margins of literary study, aligned less with literature than with education or folklore or child development. Gubar's work resists such marginalization; it is full of incisive close reading, rigorous yet flexible in method, richly and variously contextualized. It is literary study of a high order.

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