

Childhood Bound

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Amidst the matrix of adult society, how much autonomy does the child have? Childhood has typically been defined as a realm of little agency, since the child is born into a world of adult-created discourse and social conditions that materially and ideologically constrain their identity production. During the long eighteenth century, questions of the child's capability stimulated British poets, politicians, and parents alike to understand childhood through what the child could, and could not, do. John Locke, in the late 1600s, theorized the rational child who could respond to, and participate in, grown-up discourse. A hundred years later, the Romantics (building on the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile* [1763]), theorized the child of rustic innocence, defined by its alterity to adultified ways of knowing and being. Within and between these different paradigms, however, Britons over the century developed a working theory of childhood that increasingly defined youth by its boundedness: regardless of the source of the child's power (its rational connection with, or its difference from, adulthood), proper youthful autonomy was increasingly articulated as the child's exertion of control only within the spaces and places deemed suitable by adults. By binding the child to certain expectations of agency, British writers of children's literature in particular began to craft childhood as a normative zone requiring management and supervision. Children whose agency superseded these bounds were branded miscreants, sinners, and, ultimately, monsters—an understudied influence on early Gothic literature.

Critics, following Foucault, have been apt to locate the biopolitical management of children in the nineteenth century, as the state—especially through education—began to enforce the standardization of children's minds and bodies via mass schooling. Yet in the long eighteenth century, British authors began writing more and more to a child audience (John Newbery's 1744 *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* is often heralded as the start of children's literature). Early children's literature tended to be didactic—emphasizing a moral or educative lesson—but also fantastical and speculative. Tying together instruction and spaces geared toward the child's imagination (such as fairy tale lands, the nursery, gardens), children's literature figured childhood as a place of proper but playful action, decision making, and experimentation. Its managers were the typical adult figures a child would encounter, such as parents, but also the author of the story. While one branch of contemporary scholarship, fronted by Jacqueline Rose and James Kincaid, suggests that authors' desire to shape childhood removes child characters' and readers' agency, I argue that the very limits that eighteenth-century writers placed on childhood were meant to celebrate the child's autonomy, inscribed as it may be. Within the safe space of adult-managed boundaries, these authors suggested, children could safely develop and manage their own capability.

Children, however, are wont to misbehave and disagree with grown-ups' rules. Children's primers, conduct literature, and educational treatises each offered their own answer to this challenge, often through various means of discipline. Yet it was Gothic literature, exemplified with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), that served the most powerful warning to young readers: autonomy run amok will deform you, the place you inhabit, and the adults who manage you.