

EXHIBITING CHILDREN: THE YOUNG ARTIST AS CONSTRUCT AND CREATOR

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IN JULY 1912, *T. P.'s Weekly* published a one-page feature titled “The Child in Art. The Remarkable Drawings of a Girl of Twelve.” Just below the headline, a small ink illustration titled “An Angel Child” depicts two winged women kneeling on either side of a praying child, protectively arching around its naked body, their heads haloed in light. The “Girl of Twelve” is Daphne Allen, daughter of painter Hugh Allen, whose drawings and watercolours were exhibited in London and later collected in at least three volumes—*A Child's Visions* (1912), *The Birth of the Opal* (1913), and *The Cradel of Our Lord* (1916)—the first two of which were published by George Allen, a press founded by the young artist’s grandfather.¹ While the first paragraphs of the article make clear that this is an account of Allen’s work and a review of her first book, the headline and featured image are not as transparent. “The Child *in* Art” suggests representations of childhood rather than a real young person, implying not that the child is making, exhibiting, or selling art—all of which Allen did—but instead that she is art itself. Furthermore, the “Remarkable Drawings” are *of*, not *by*, a girl of twelve, a prepositional ambivalence that allows us to imagine Allen as simultaneously artist and model. A cursory reader might pause briefly over the drawing of an “angel child” and wonder: did Allen draw that idealised, beatific infant—or is that infant Allen? Who is real, and who is an artful construct? After all, by the time Allen hung her first gallery exhibit, the boundary between real and imagined childhood was deliciously porous. Lewis Carroll’s *Wonderland* and its dream-child protagonist—both the living Alice Liddell and the shapeshifting girl of the story—still resonated from the previous century, and fawning mothers could purchase blue velvet, lace-collared Fauntleroy suits to transform their sons into copies of Frances Hodgson Burnett’s fictional little lord.

This intimate exchange between real children and the stories we tell about them is at the fore of juvenilia studies, as scholars examining texts children produce must balance attention to the young person as author or artist with a critical awareness of

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systems of publication, reception, and analysis that are typically managed by adults. In what follows, I explore the challenges of researching and writing about child-produced creative work amid the often-overpowering constructs of childhood that surround it by investigating two young artists as case studies: Allen, that remarkable girl of twelve, and Pamela Bianco, whose art was first exhibited in Turin in 1919 when she was 12 years old and later in London, Dublin, New York, and San Francisco. Bianco was the daughter of author Margery Williams Bianco, and her early publications include *Flora* (1919), a book of her drawings accompanied by poems by Walter de la Mare.² Both Allen and Bianco pursued art into adulthood—Allen as an illustrator for popular periodicals and a designer of stained glass windows and Bianco as an illustrator and fine artist—but my focus here is on their work as children. First, I describe some of the challenges I face in researching and writing about these child artists, most of which arise from the idiosyncrasies of their cultural moment; in particular, my access to their work is sometimes frustrated and sometimes illuminated by the discourses of childhood embedded in lingering Romanticism and burgeoning modernism. Next, I argue that both were savvy and self-aware in negotiating, through their art, the discourses that surrounded them. My hope is that the methodologies I use might be relevant to others, and with that in mind, I end by considering how my approach could prove useful for scholars embarking on parallel projects, in different periods and contexts.

The Child Artist as Exhibit

MY EARLIEST glimpses of both Allen and Bianco were warped by the beer goggles of Romantic childhood. As Alan Richardson and others have made clear, Romantic childhood as a cultural construct was diverse and “no less powerful for being somewhat incoherent” (Richardson 171). However, the divine child epitomised in William Wordsworth’s *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*—that ur-text of Romantic childhood—remains one of its most powerful and persistent paradigms. Barbara Garlitz writes that the assumptions “that the child is fresh from God and still remembers its heavenly home, that the aura which surrounds childhood fades into the common light of adulthood, that the child has a wisdom which the man loses ... became the most important and the most common ideas about childhood in the nineteenth century” and, in fact, beyond (647).³

This thoroughly established model of the beatific child certainly influences the publication and reception, for example, of Allen’s first book. The title page of *A Child’s Visions* features a drawing of a naked child perched precariously (and improbably) atop a craggy mountain and framed by a sky filled with stars (fig. 1). The image, read alongside the book’s title and a parenthetical reference to the artist—“(Daphne Allen, Aged 12 Years)” —might suggest that the pictured child is the artist herself, a confusion similar to that generated by the *T. P.’s Weekly* review. Despite the fact that Allen was, at the book’s publication, an adolescent, the text works to frame her as simultaneously infant and wise, her connection to the spiritual world

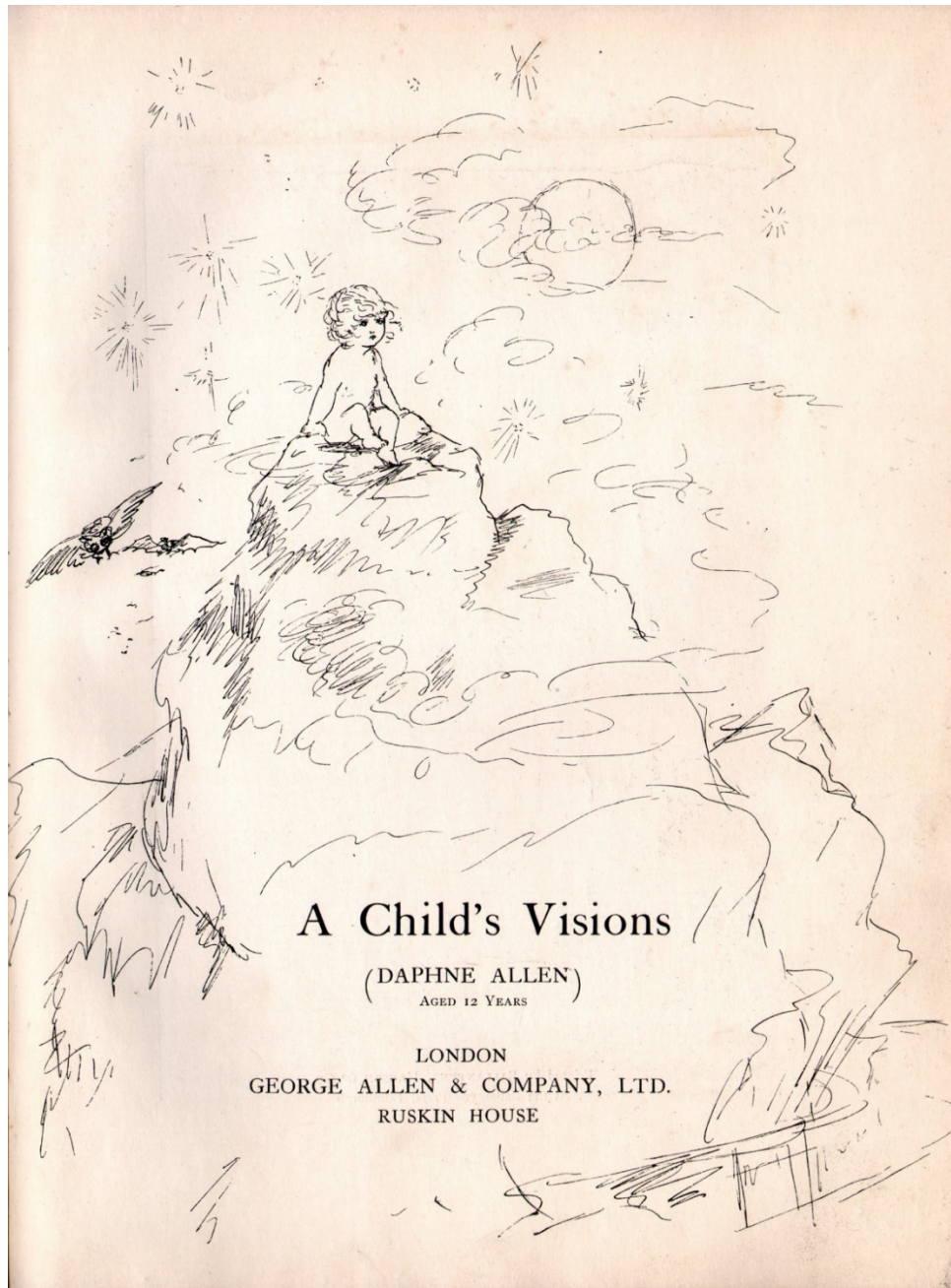


Fig. 1. Daphne Allen, title page to *A Child's Visions*.

unmediated even by a wisp of clothing. In case we miss the point, the next spread features one of Allen's angel drawings accompanied by probably the most famous passage from Wordsworth's *Ode*, reminding us that "Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting" and that "trailing clouds of glory do we come / From God, who is our home" (qtd. in Allen v). In the book's remaining pages, the editors chose to feature only Allen's religious illustrations despite the fact that, according to a reviewer for the

Bookman, Allen's gallery exhibit included "scenes from old Fairy Tales, Greek Mythology, the Arthurian Legends, Shakespeare, Wagner, and a number of exquisitely graceful studies of Cupids" ("News" 4).⁴

These images, paired with passages from hymns and religious poetry, dwell on biblical scenes that emphasise children's spiritual purity—for example, a tableau of angels adoring the infant Christ and an illustration of the young Jesus discovered in the temple—and C. Lewis Hind, in his introduction to *A Child's Visions*, characterises Allen as an artist who takes "the New Testament [as] her chief source of inspiration" (ix). Reviews of the book affirm this figuration. For example, in the pages of *The Antiquary* Rev. J. Charles Cox writes that "there is evidently in the mind and brain, or thought-power—or whatever we like to call it—an exquisite fund of holy ideas and pure conceits, to which it is impossible to assign any other term than inspiration" (336).

Early reviews and reproductions of Bianco's art were not, like those of Allen, curated to focus on only spiritual or religious imagery; instead, her first published work features idealised figures, primarily children, in natural or domestic landscapes. However, in many ways Bianco was presented, like Allen, as the epitome of Romantic childhood. J. B. Manson, then the secretary of the Tate Gallery, wrote in a review of Bianco's drawings in *The International Studio*, "It is as though Pamela Bianco were the mouthpiece of a divine spirit; as though, through her, a spirit fresh and sweet as a south wind over a field of violets finds concrete expression. ... As the throat of a nightingale trills forth its inimitable song, so she expresses the gracious and seraphic visions of her innocent nature" (22, 23). Manson sustains this overwrought language for five pages, describing Bianco's drawings as "expressions of a spirit clear as crystal" and writing that hers "is a nature untrammelled by the impediments of intellectual knowledge, uncorrupted by useless, if inevitable, association, unhampered by concepts" (23). Manson's paean to Bianco's genius unites Wordsworth's divine image of childhood and its "visionary gleam" with a Rousseauvian commitment to the unsullied goodness of the child of nature. The review is illustrated with a photograph of the young artist, hair fastened in beribboned pigtails, likely a photograph that predates by a few years Bianco's gallery debut at age 12. Like Allen, then, Bianco is sometimes framed by adults around her as a young child rather than an adolescent, perhaps a strategy to underscore her precocity or an attempt to shore up her childhood against the impending adulthood that would spoil her status as a divine and unmediated "mouthpiece" of God and nature. In 1924, when Bianco was 17, Helen Appleton Read of the *Brooklyn Eagle*, fretting that "Child prodigies have a distressing, if normal, way of growing up into men and women," turned (predictably) to the *Ode*, noting that "'Shades of the prison house,' to quote Wordsworth, close more darkly upon the child of genius, perhaps by force of comparison, than upon the ordinary boy or girl" (5). Taken together, assessments of Bianco's art suggest that, as with Wordsworth's "Mighty Prophet" or Rousseau's fictional pupil, her divine innocence is both her greatest asset and her most troubling vulnerability.

While my view of Allen and Bianco is refracted by Romantic tropes of childhood, any sense of their creative process is obscured by Romantic models of genius that figure artistic work as solely inspiration, no perspiration. Jerome McGann has

described this as an ideology of “sincerity” generated by “a set of stylistic conventions developed by the Romantics to give the illusion of ‘spontaneous overflow’ to their verse” (63). The “spontaneous overflow” McGann references is, of course, Wordsworth’s term from *Lyrical Ballads*, and Angela Esterhammer notes that similar formulations of immediate and (to use Manson’s word above) “untrammelled” creativity are present in the work of William Blake, John Keats, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who in *Kubla Khan* described composing poetry “without any sensation or consciousness of effort” (Esterhammer 154). A dedication to Romantic models of creativity is one of the most persistent notes in accounts of Allen and Bianco, and often the assumption that they were naïve interlocutors speaking forth inspiration works hand in hand with—or, perhaps, relies on—assumptions that the child’s imagination, like the Romantic poet’s, is both innate and spontaneous. For example, many writers describe Allen’s work as requiring neither forethought nor skill. A reviewer in the *Sphere* calls her “an *improvisatore*,” and Hind notes that her drawings “show no sign of effort, because they were all done in joy without self-consciousness” (C. K. S. 98, Allen x). A reviewer in *The Bookman* uses a similar formulation, writing that Allen “draws and paints for her own amusement only, making no labour of it, giving rapid expression in colour and line to any fancy that comes to her, using no indiarubber [*sic*] to sketch but leaving it unaltered in its first freshness” (“News” 4). Hind also compares Allen’s art to play—“Other children play seriously with dolls: Daphne plays seriously with Art” (Allen ix), he writes — a description echoed across multiple reviews of her work that erases any sense of craft in favour of a joyful and therefore truthful and innocent activity. Similar language appears in accounts of Bianco’s exhibitions. A reviewer in the *New York Times* assures readers that “an eraser is something she has never known in her work” (“Girl” 12); another describes Bianco’s art as “the unconscious outgrowth of her play spirit” (Read 5).

One of the consequences of framing Allen and Bianco as Romantic geniuses is the insistence, by the adults around them, that they be preserved from what is considered the potentially disastrous repercussions of educating them as artists. Doing so, many reviewers and patrons argue, would spoil the naturalness of their work, replacing it with a studied artificiality. Some descriptions of Allen’s work locate its merit in the absence of formal education; H. Addington Bruce, writing in *Good Housekeeping*, is careful to note that Allen, “according to good authority, has had no art training whatever, yet her drawings ... have been acclaimed by some critics as being of a quality that ‘would not shame William Blake’” (333).⁵ However, this approach to preserving the young artist’s naïveté is particularly pronounced in reviews of Bianco’s work. A piece in *Current Opinion*, for example, quotes Bianco’s father as insisting that his daughter “has never ... had a teacher in drawing and painting,” and that while “it has not been possible to keep Pamela from seeing anything in the way of art,” he and his wife “believe in guiding, but not forcing, education. We do not want Pamela to lose any of her originality through the influence of others” (“Girl” 675). One writer in *American Art News* writes of Bianco that “it would be difficult to overestimate her probable success if left to evolve her own future, untrammelled by mischievous instruction” (“Child Genius” 5).

Both Allen and Bianco were exhibiting their work in the early decades of the twentieth century, so while Wordsworth still held court over ideas of childhood, the modernists, and in particular their preoccupation with the child's innocent eye, were beginning to intervene.⁶ Wassily Kandinsky, in his essay "On the Problem of Form"—which was published in 1912, the same year Allen published *A Child's Visions*—writes that "There is an unconscious and enormous force in the child, which ... puts the work of the child on an equally high (and often much higher!) level as the work of the adult" (167). This "enormous force" was often characterised as primitive, and adult artists, stymied by experience and artistic training, could no longer achieve the child's enviable perspective. Roger Fry approached child artists in a similar way, writing in "Children's Drawings," published in 1917 upon his exhibition at the Omega Workshops of children's art alongside that of modern artists, that "no modern adult can retain the freshness of vision, the surprise and shock, the intimacy and sharpness of notation, the *imprévu* quality of primitive art. And it is just here that untaught children have enormous superiority" (267–68). Jonathan Fineberg has traced the many ways child art influenced adult artists, noting its centrality to a range of modernist movements. "For the artists of the twentieth century," he notes, "a serious interest in the art of children became as remarkably varied and complex from one artist to the next as it was pervasive. Expressionists, cubists, futurists and the artists of the avant-garde Russian movements all hung the art of children alongside their own in their pioneering exhibitions in the early years of the century" (12).

Allen's work appears more Victorian than modernist in style; a writer in the *Athenaeum* notes, for example, that her talent "is akin on one side to that of Blake, and on the other to that of Kate Greenaway," those two names registering a decidedly nineteenth-century vision of childhood ("Notices" 69). It is not unexpected, then, that Allen's drawings and paintings are framed rather infrequently as the type of child art that might appeal to the modernists, although a handful of accounts do refer to her in this way. For example, one feature on her paintings compares them to the post-Impressionists (Brastias 71).⁷ Bianco's drawings, on the other hand, are much more prone to the idealisations of the modernists, likely because her style's flat perspectives and bold washes of colour more closely resemble modern art and because her work first hung on gallery walls in 1919, seven years after Allen's and more securely amid the modernists' celebration of child art. Bianco's father, in newspaper interviews, bolsters her place in modernist movements, noting that he "considers no artist in the world comparable to the Italian primitives," but "he believes that Pamela is directly in line with the Italian tradition" (Read 5), and reviewers agree. Manson compares her to "the unknown primitive man who painted the unexcelled Bison on the walls of the caves in the Dordogne in those days when schools of painting were, happily, undreamt of" (22). The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* notes that Pamela "is part of the movement, which is the term used by painters for artists who are modernistic in their tendencies. Although she has never studied or seen the works of Picasso or Derain, it is almost as if she had been taught by them, and the answer is that Pamela is a sensitive medium for the Zeitgeist, and that being of her day and generation she cannot help but use its idiom" (Read 5).

Note that Read describes Bianco's participation in "the movement" as passive or unintentional; Bianco "cannot help" her participation in modernist practices. She, like many of the children who inspired modern artists, is understood as modernist not by choice—Read does not claim that she is putting into practice a creative philosophy—but instead because, through a child's "natural" sensitivity, she communicates the spirit of a movement that sought to capture a similar artistic innocence. This difference is crucial, as it positions the child as an amateur, an unintentional inspiration and muse, and the adult as the professional practitioner. This aetionormativity⁸ characterises most writing about the child and modernism to the present day. Consider Rudolf Arnheim's 1997 essay, "Beginning with the Child." Arnheim is, in fact, refreshingly attentive to the differences among child artists. "Children's drawings," he writes, "are referred to as though they were a standardised product," when in fact those who have had "some experience in the field of child art" know that "its output is almost as varied as that of adults" (16). However, that attention to the child's artistic agency recedes later in the same piece, when he writes of "the difference between the intentions of the artist and those of the child." Arnheim assumes that an adult artist's turn to a childlike style signals sophisticated intention. He argues, for example, that Joan Miró produces work that "could hardly have been conceived by someone who had never seen a child's drawing." Miró's reduction of the human form to simple frontal symmetry is artistry and his use of empty ground meaningful, meant to "express solitude" (22). Yet Arnheim does not extend the same interpretive generosity to the child artist who, he argues, demonstrates not sophistication but "naïveté." The child, Arnheim suggests, essentially has no intentions, and the empty ground in her composition is not meaningful but "uncultivated space" (22). That phrase both naturalises the assumption of the child artist's innocence—her "uncultivated" work is like virgin soil—and renders her talent as potential: fodder for adult artists or a sign that she might, someday, design rather than merely draw. Arnheim's essay crystallises precisely what I would like to disrupt in my readings of Allen and Bianco.

The Young Artist as Creator

WHAT happens if we do not, as Arnheim does, assume naïveté? What if we begin instead with the assumption that the child artist is an intentional, agentic subject: an artist whose talent lies not in her youth but in her process, and who navigates the art world—its shifting standards of merit and style, its traditions and tropes, and even its marketplace—with deliberation and insight? While I could say more about the spectrum of child figures adults deploy when writing about Allen and Bianco, I prefer to wed that essential critical scepticism with a respect for both young people as creators producing art. In other words, I would like to craft a methodology that approaches child-produced culture that is not entirely bounded by cultural constructions of childhood, as that frame largely neglects children as living subjects. So where, amid all of this overdetermined language, can I at least begin to look for Allen and Bianco as embodied children?

First, I can locate disruptions in the narratives that surround them—disruptions that have the potential to reveal the arbitrary or precarious nature of what purport to be true and totalising narratives of childhood. One such fissure can be found in early accounts of Allen’s depiction of the Crucifixion. According to art critic Walter D. Ellis, who contributed a preface to Allen’s *A Child’s Visions*, that book includes drawings selected from “the many thousands which she has drawn since she first attempted to portray the Crucifixion at the age of three” (Allen vii). Allen’s precocious, three-year-old drawings are mentioned in a handful of newspaper accounts of Allen, sometimes accompanied by mentions of the Crucifixion, sometimes not.⁹ This fawning and repetitive gesture toward the origins of Allen’s sacred genius, after a time, grows tiresome; however, that monotony is shattered by an article published in Australia’s *Express and Telegraph*. That reviewer writes of Allen that “as a child her artistic expressions took quaint forms at times. For example, she drew a picture of the Crucifixion—with a steamboat in the background” (“Artist” 4). After encountering this odd aside, I returned to my dozens of carefully collected reviews of Allen’s book and found no mention of the steamboat. I flipped through *A Child’s Visions* itself, searching the horizons of the two separate Crucifixion scenes included there for a telltale puff of smoke and found nothing.

This unusual blip in Allen’s archive is an evocative inconsistency in the narrative that surrounds her. Perhaps the reviewer for the *Express and Telegraph*, who likely did not have access to the originals of the artwork displayed in Allen’s first gallery show, was misinterpreting a poorly reproduced image of Allen’s work? Or maybe the steamboat does (or did at one time) exist, and Allen’s editors passed over this early drawing when compiling the first bound volume of her “visions”? The latter is a tantalizing possibility; the young artist might have drawn “without erasure,” but the adults around her made this drawing, for the most part, disappear. Answering these questions would resolve the mysterious appearance of this anachronistic steamboat; however, the circumstances that led to this review in fact matter very little. It is the consequences of its publication that are noteworthy. The steamboat interrupts not only the historical integrity of a scene of the Crucifixion but also the carefully curated narrative of Allen as sacred child prodigy. This Australian reviewer, by situating Allen as a charming but bumbling toddler with a pencil, destabilises a dominant narrative of Allen as an inspired genius. His steamboat muddies the waters, both demonstrating that Allen’s drawings did not always align with the sacred text and unconsciously letting it slip that the adults around her did not agree about her cultural status.

I am not the first to comment on such inconsistencies in the framing of Daphne Allen and, in fact, another way to acknowledge living children as artists while remaining attentive to the idealisations that warp our view of them is to look to the adults around them who acknowledge and challenge stifling narratives of childhood innocence or genius. One such adult is Anthony Ludovici, whose 1913 essay “Raw Material at the Dudley Galleries,” published in the modernist journal *The New Age*, introduces Allen as an example of the “general tendency to admire and court the immature in England.” While Ludovici certainly does not admire Allen’s artwork, noting “the ridiculous prostrate attitude of the highly respectable Press” before her “nursery productions,” in the course of his criticism he does consider the living girl

behind the sensation. “Why,” he asks, “should I be left alone to protect this unfortunate child, Daphne Allen, and, in her person, all the more or less gifted children of England, from your deadly drooling embrace?” He sneers at the “pack of hydrocephalous and gushing adults” attached to her and laments that “we cannot unfortunately set in motion the machinery of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children—the cruelty here is too subtle, too remotely tragic and disastrous, to pierce the thick skulls of this Society’s officials” (704). In this way, Ludovici veers to an entirely different figuration of childhood: the vulnerable child in peril. However, his sense of the young artist as a living girl who merits not only the adoration but also the concern of the adults around her punctures the dream of Allen as a holy genius. Moreover, his deflating description of her drawings as “nothing wonderful” swiftly brings her back to earth, and other reviewers joined Ludovici in characterising Allen as just another child with a proclivity for art. A reviewer for the *Manchester Guardian*, for example, notes that the young artist’s “visions” display “most of the technical deficiencies common to artists of about that age [twelve]” (“New” 5), while the *Athenaeum* points out that “her figures are not correct; she cannot draw a hand; her line is often fumbling; and she does not understand the incidence of light and shadow” (“Notices” 69).

Inconsistent narratives also surround Bianco, and a number of publications printed contradictory assessments of her and her work. While one reviewer in the *New York Times*, as cited above, is astonished that Bianco draws without erasure, another tries to deflate such exaggerated praise, insisting that Bianco “has developed precisely *as any strong talent develops*, from the clever but weakish sophistication of her early years—in her case, of course, very early years—to a bold technique and an adequate command of her instrument” (“Art” X8, emphasis mine). This reviewer’s subtle suggestion that those who admire Bianco are misplacing their admiration appears in stronger language in the *Brooklyn Eagle*. While that newspaper published a number of laudatory accounts of Bianco’s exhibits, one reviewer characterises her success in New York as another example of “the infant industry of prodigy-art” in which “babe-and-suckling rivalry” puts accomplished adult artists out of business (qtd. in “Girl,” *Current* 675). Other contradictions are subtler; the *New York Times*, for example, published a handful of articles in 1921 cataloguing the great financial success of Bianco’s exhibit at the Anderson Galleries, celebrating the fact that the young artist found a “ready market,” selling more than 100 pieces of art for prices ranging from \$50 to \$300 to renowned patrons such as John Galsworthy, Mrs. W. K. Vanderbilt, and Miss Helen Frick (“Girl” 12, “Child’s” 10). The *Times* suggests many times that Bianco is disinterested in the show and her success; “Pamela Bianco,” one headline explains, “takes only a casual interest in work that astounds others” (“Girl” 12). However, in the same article, Bianco’s voice breaks through in a manner that might contradict this facile assumption. The reviewer, describing a “dear, quaint little sketch” of a child holding an apple and running after some rabbits, records an exchange between a patron and the artist: “‘Do you suppose she is going to feed the rabbits?’ some one [*sic*], seeing the picture, wondered aloud. ‘Perhaps she is going to feed herself,’ suggested Pamela” (12). The reviewer does not comment on Bianco’s retort, a response that registers both her investment in the interpretation of her work

and her recognition—also signalled in her paintings and drawings, which I will explore below—of a desiring child, a child who is interested in profit (for Bianco can use the sale of her work to, quite literally, feed herself) and consumption (the ways viewers consume both art and artist).



Fig. 2. Daphne Allen, "Christ Crowning the Holy Innocents," from *A Child's Visions*, p. 23.

These glimpses of Allen and Bianco, however, are mediated by adults, and I am interested in how children produce culture; I therefore turn to the work the young women themselves produced. This is complicated, as it is undeniable that the venues that displayed and reproduced their drawings also were organised by adults. Yet some of these images allow us to speculate about how, to borrow Robin Bernstein's formulation, these young artists adopted and adapted the scripts that framed their early careers. For example, *A Child's Visions* is replete with images of holy childhood, represented in the Christ child, winged cherubs, and devout peasant children. This might be due in part to editors' decisions about which drawings to include in the book and in part due to Allen's own choice of subject; in any case, she was framed as a divine child, and she produced images of divine children. Perhaps this is a self-perpetuating cycle, evidence that Allen cannot escape the narrative written for her. However, it is also possible that Allen—nearly a teenager, a girl who grew up around artists and publishers—was aware that her fame was sustained by an appetite for particular *types* of child art and that this knowledge filters into her work. For example, the book includes no less than four illustrations of the Holy Innocents, the infants murdered by Herod after the birth of Jesus. One of these illustrations—Allen's image

of “Christ Crowning the Holy Innocents” (fig. 2)—bears for certain viewers all the signs of divine child art: a heavenly landscape (or should I say cloudscape), a haloed infant Jesus, naked cherubic children. However, the long queue of babies awaiting their wings and the pile of crowns secreted behind the seated Virgin also suggests the mundane nature of her genius—common enough to buy those crowns in bulk—and the unstoppable machinery of the ideologies that keep Allen’s name in the press. Perhaps Allen recognised that the Holy Innocents, glorified for their purity but martyred for it, are an apt image for Allen herself, whose fame relies on her imagined innocence but who is, in a sense, obscured by it.

Bianco’s art often exhibits a parallel sense of overproduction: some of her drawings and paintings cram the frame with flower-bedecked, naked cherubs, displaying a surfeit of Romantic children. However, Bianco gestures towards this common visual trope only to manipulate it. Many of her child figures meet gaze for gaze, aware of the adults looking at them. The heavy lashes of her children (including herself, in a self-portrait) frame eyes that communicate a self-consciousness about being looked at, perhaps even consumed (figs. 3 and 4). That self-consciousness



Figs. 3 and 4. Pamela Bianco, “Bitter Waters,” from *Flora*, p. 19, and self-portrait, from *Flora*, p. 43.

unfolds into an awareness of *why* the child is the subject of the adult gaze, as a number of Bianco’s drawings make forcefully apparent the sexual undertones of Romantic childhood—the tantalizing possibility that innocence can be ruined.¹⁰ Consider “The Strong Child,” an image hung in her gallery exhibit, published in her collection *Flora*, and later singled out by the reviewer in *Art and Life* as a notable example of the “exquisite, joyous tenderness” of Bianco’s work (fig. 5). This child stares out of the page aggressively, her head crowned by an elaborate coif that features, it seems, horns—a gesture towards the animalistic or even savage Romantic child—and her face framed by boughs of a pomegranate tree, one fruit bursting open. While the pomegranate was (notably among the Italian primitives, to which Bianco is often compared) a common religious motif to signify the fullness of Christ’s suffering, it also suggests a rampant fertility and sensuality.¹¹

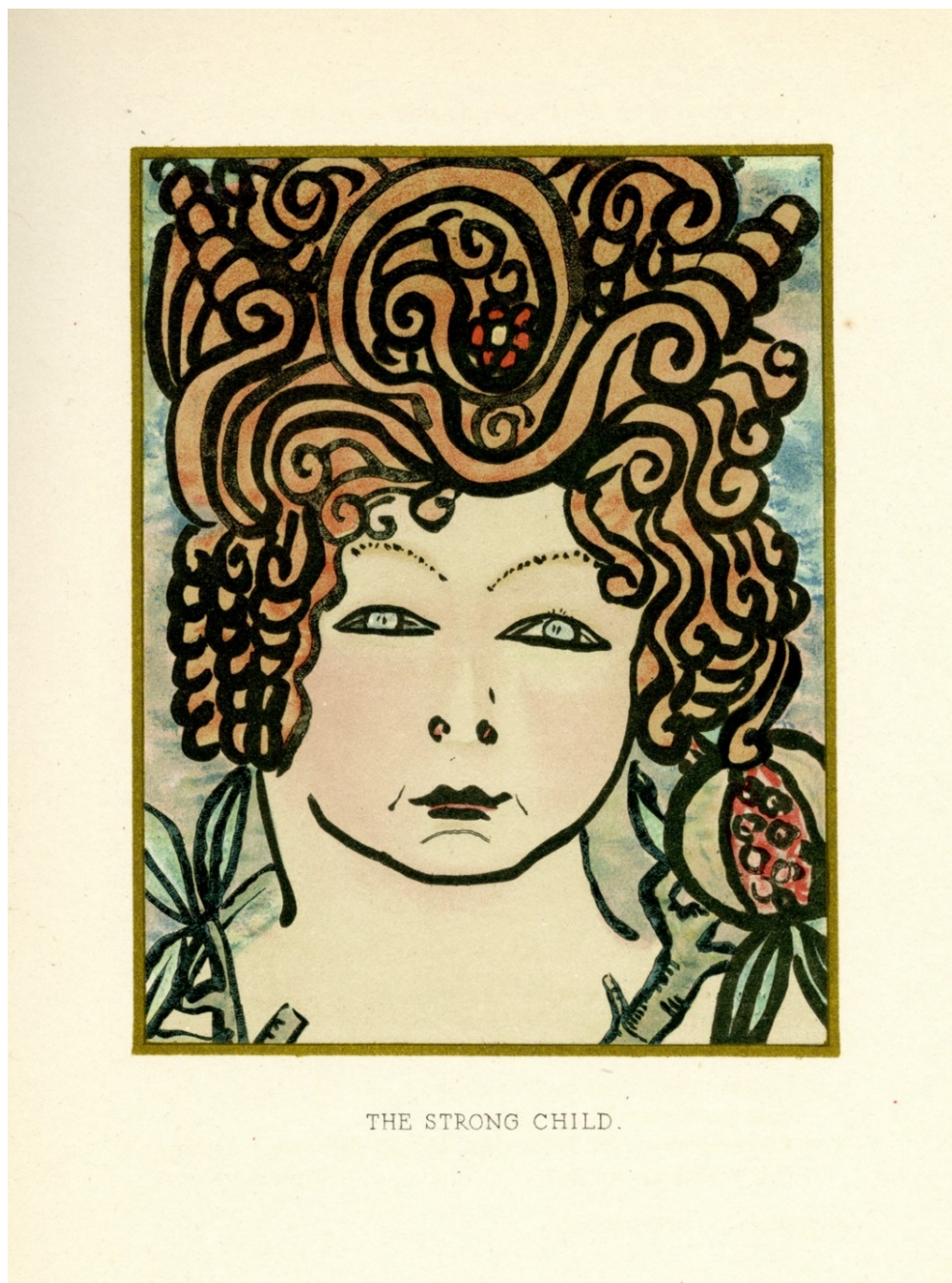


Fig. 5. Pamela Bianco, "The Strong Child," from *Flora*, p. 23.

The sexuality of Bianco's child subjects ranges from the suggestive, as seen in "The Strong Child," to the explicit, as seen in her illustration "The Path," also published in *Flora* (fig. 6). Like many of Bianco's drawings, this illustration's style recalls simultaneously religious iconography and the erotic line drawings of Decadent

artists such as Aubrey Beardsley, and the tension between sacred and profane extends to its subject. The dominant female figure resembles an angel or protective guide; the fronds splayed behind her back form wings, and her hand is pressed to her breast in



Fig. 6. Pamela Bianco, "The Path," from *Flora*, p. 13.

a gesture that might suggest reverence, love, or concern. However, that reading of this image is troubled by the child reclining below her, bottom exposed and ready to be slapped. If the angel is a guide, the viewer cannot help but wonder towards what. The titular path behind the figures winds towards a church, but the angel's tutelage leads toward sexual knowledge, not religious epiphany. The child's suggestive smile, arched eyebrows, and direct gaze—as well as the pattern of her dress, which reproduces in miniature that of the angel's, and the ripe cherries dangling from her wrist—imply that she is all too happy to follow, although her innocence is likely already lost.

However, if the child's steady gaze demands the viewer engage with her, not everyone is willing to do so. Walter de la Mare, in the poem he composed to accompany Bianco's drawing, ignores this evocative adult-child pairing completely and focuses instead on the small building nestled into the right corner of the image. "Is it an abbey that I see / Hard-by that tapering poplar-tree, / Whereat that path hath end?" the poem begins, before nostalgically describing, over the course of four stanzas, "the timeworn, crumbling roof," "the turret slim" and its bell's "faint notes," and the "gemlike" glow of stained glass. In the poem's final lines, the abbey's candles beckon the poem's speaker inside: "'See stranger; come! / Here is thy home; No longer stray!'" (12). This closing petition—the exhortation to keep to the path and re-enter the spiritual home—is the only note of discipline in the poem, and it is of a decidedly different sort that that played out between the angelic figure and child. In fact, de la Mare's lines seem intentional in directing our attention *away* from the playful sexuality of Bianco's drawing. The questioning structure of his first lines—what do I see?—invites readers to follow his gaze, to ignore the image's central elements and instead hunt out what they might otherwise dismiss as ancillary detail.

The dissonance between de la Mare's text and Bianco's drawing foregrounds the power of Romantic constructions of childhood and just how cannily the child artist can identify and exploit the fissures and tensions in those constructions. Yet despite (or perhaps because of) the discomfort drawings like "The Path" can generate among the adults around her, Bianco created many illustrations like this one—images that demand recognition of the desirable, and perhaps desiring, child and communicate just how greedy the child-besotted adult can be. The adults Bianco imagines cradle, grasp, and grab children, often enveloping young people within their larger frames. Was Bianco registering her awareness that she, like the young people she drew, was an object of discipline and desire? If so, it seems that, as a savvy artist, Bianco sought to translate the adult's desire into the child's power and profit.

Methodology

I DO NOT advocate approaching child artists such as Allen or Bianco as real, unmediated children *or* as pure constructions. We cannot neglect the discourses of childhood and art that inflect our view of them; however, all representations of Allen or Bianco, I argue, are also haunted by the real children who gave rise to them. This is not a bind but instead an opportunity to explore the traffic between embodied

children and abstractions of them. Others have dismantled the binary between real and imaged childhood. Marah Gubar's proposed kinship model of childhood, for example, recognises that children and adults are kin "in that from the moment we are born (and even before then) we are immersed in multiple discourses not of our own making that influence who we are, how we think, what we do and say"—and that this is not a reason to abandon the project of "theorising in new ways about what it means to be a child" ("Risky" 454, 450). Gubar and others—including Bernstein, Richard Flynn, Karen Sánchez-Eppler, David Rudd, Anna Mae Duane, Katharine Capshaw, and Rachel Conrad—have demonstrated, from different perspectives, the dividends of understanding both adults and children as simultaneously situated by discourse and contributors *to* it.

In approaching texts, images, and other cultural artefacts generated by children, then, I suggest that we abandon a model that understands the relationship of actual child to imagined child as a binary and adopt, instead, the model of a spectrum, an always-negotiated scale between total idealisation and child-in-the-world. Using that spectrum as a critical tool to examine historical and contemporary examples of child-produced culture allows small pieces of evidence to be read as resonant rather than anomalous. Consider, for example, the fleeting reference to Allen's steamboat. If I assume the real child and the child-figure are opposing categories, I must interpret the Australian reviewer's reference to the steamboat in one of two ways: it is either evidence of a fictionalization of Allen as naïve child artist or an unassailable trace of her real-childness. However, if I instead situate the steamboat reference on the spectrum between real and imagined Allen, thinking about it alongside other representations and understanding it as part of both imaginings of her and her own agency, I find that the steamboat complicates simple narratives of Allen. I begin to develop a keener sense of fluctuating ideas about and experiences of childhood from one pole to another, across space and time. The goal of this method is not to place a piece of evidence at a precise and correct point on the spectrum. Instead, we can work to approach representations of real children with curiosity rather than scepticism. This allows us to take advantage of the indeterminacy of any evidence of childhood by sliding it up and down this spectrum, gauging the impact of reading it as more or less constructed or true.¹²

Every time an adult praises, dismisses, or even merely describes Allen or Bianco, I consider this evocative play between the child as a construction and the child as a living subject. For example, one reviewer notes that Allen "was astonished when told of the exhibition which was going to be held, and that a book was to be published containing some of her drawings. 'Very nice? Oh, yes, but rather tiresome'" ("Genius" 4). I might assume this is more fiction than truth. The dialogue in this passage is not explicitly attributed to Allen, and the reviewer might have crafted it to reinforce the image of a young artist uninterested in the marketplace. The review is then an example of the ways adults fictionalize children to support popular ideas of childhood. However, if I slide this piece of evidence toward the centre of the spectrum between imagined and real childhood, I might imagine the sentiment is accurate but its representation is not; perhaps this conversation took place, but the reviewer reworked Allen's words to align with what adults think (or hope) a child would say. I also could

imagine that the review is truly quoting Allen, in which case I might consider how her words align with or trouble the purposes to which they are being put. Is Allen revealing an innocence toward the status of her work? Boredom with the prospect of being trotted out for the adoration of adults? Something else? Considering these possibilities together defamiliarises my assumptions about how representations of childhood work and keeps me open to potential new narratives or unsought-for avenues of inquiry.

We need those avenues in thinking about child artists—and in considering child-produced culture as a whole. In recuperating and interpreting the work of children, scholars of juvenilia are destined to encounter many figures whose critical traditions are just as overwrought as Allen’s and Bianco’s, but juvenilia studies has proven that the density of discourses surrounding childhood need not completely obscure our views of young people as contributors to culture—that such discourses pose rich and generative challenges. Scholars such as Laurie Langbauer, Angela Sorby, Christine Alexander, and Juliet McMaster have documented the role young people have played and continue to play in literary and cultural history. As Alexander and McMaster explain, “the child as creator of culture has been subsumed within the child as mere consumer,” and yet “The child’s expression of his or her own subjectivity is there and available for us, if we will only take the time to pay attention” (1). Langbauer’s work in particular breaks the critical frame of juvenilia, a term that suggests the immature work of a writers who later establish themselves as well-known authors, to consider instead a “juvenile tradition” that “recasts literary history,” requiring us to recognise previously understudied forms and redefine seemingly well-known literary movements and periods (3–4). While Langbauer’s work focuses on late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century children, we might locate new juvenile traditions elsewhere, in other cultural moments. Allen’s work, for example, might revise our vision of Romantic childhood and children’s participation in creating the contours of that paradigm, and situating Bianco as an artist, rather than an inspiration, within the modernist tradition demands a reassessment of young people’s agency in the face of the totalising narrative of the “innocent eye.” I am therefore grateful for the challenges that young people such as Allen and Bianco—who are both exhibits and exhibitors, child-figures and children—pose. Their work makes clear that in untangling the dynamic between real and imagined child, we can be surprised by evidence that even the most freighted examples of child-produced culture might refract into many shades of meaning.

NOTES

1. *The Cradel of Our Lord* was published by Headley Brothers.
2. Margery Williams Bianco would later write *The Velveteen Rabbit* (1922). Pamela Bianco illustrated some of her mother’s children’s books, including *The Little Wooden Doll* (1925) and *The Skin Horse* (1927). For a novelisation of the lives of both mother and daughter, see Laurel Davis Huber’s *The Velveteen Daughter* (2017).
3. James Holt McGavran, Jr. and Jennifer Smith Daniel argue that Wordsworth’s holy child has enjoyed undeserved dominance in our understanding of Romantic childhood, “since posterity

- has not sufficiently recognised Wordsworth’s concomitant awareness of the toils and dangers children—and their parents—have always had to face” (ix).
4. Allen’s editors departed from this religious focus when they published her second book, *The Birth of the Opal*. That volume, subtitled “A Child’s Fancies,” features illustrations of what one reviewer in *The Book Monthly* calls “nature fantasies,” or fanciful creation stories with titles such as “How the Pearls First Came” and “The Story of the Wind,” written by Allen herself (“Personal” 831). *The Cradel of Our Lord*, as its title suggests, resituated Allen as primarily an artist of religious subjects.
 5. This *Good Housekeeping* article, titled “Making the Most of Childhood,” references Allen as one of many talented children whose parents encouraged their natural interests and promises that such “marvelous development” is “possible in all normal children” (332).
 6. While here I discuss the innocent eye primarily in the context of modernism, Ruskin famously referred to it in his manual *Elements of Drawing* (1857). There, he characterises the creative impulse of successful adult artists as childlike. “The whole technical power of painting depends on our recovery of what may be called the *innocence of the eye*,” writes Ruskin, “that is to say, a sort of childish perception of ... flat stains of colour, merely as such, without consciousness of what they signify.... A highly accomplished artist has always reduced himself as nearly as possible to this condition of infantine sight” (22–23).
 7. Notably, M. T. H. Sadler refers to Daphne Allen in the introduction to his 1914 translation of Kandinsky’s *The Art of Spiritual Harmony*, but he does so to *challenge* rather than affirm “the analogy ... between the neo-primitive vision and that of a child” (xiv). He recognises that the former sometimes tends toward “definitely religious picture[s],” but that “It is not often that children draw religious scenes.” He acknowledges as an exception “a book of such drawings by a child of twelve,” Allen’s *A Child’s Visions*, but notes that her “religious drawings have the graceful charm of childhood, but they are mere childish echoes of conventional prettiness” (xv).
 8. See Nikolajeva, pp. 8–9.
 9. See, for example, Cox’s “Sacred Visions of a Child” in *The Antiquary*, “News of Books” in the *New York Times*, and “Genius at Thirteen” in the *Adelaide Express and Telegraph*.
 10. See Kincaid, *Child-Loving*, and Gubar, “Innocence.”
 11. For an example of the pomegranate in the work of the Italian primitives, see Botticelli’s *Madonna of the Pomegranate* (1490). Bianco also includes a pomegranate as a sensual, suggestive image in the frontispiece to her illustrated edition of Oscar Wilde’s “The Birthday of the Infanta,” published by MacMillan in 1930, when Bianco was in her mid-twenties.
 12. In taking this approach, I am accepting Gubar’s challenge to explore evidence of real children with a “cautious humility” that recognises the limitations of what we can know about children’s experiences but does not allow the inevitably tentative and fractional nature of our knowledge to paralyze inquiry (“*Peter*” 479). I am also following her lead in looking to Rita Felski’s *The Limits of Critique*, in which Felski encourages scholars to examine critically their field’s “hypercritical style of analysis” and to adopt “alternative forms of intellectual life” (10).

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