

AN INFANT PHENOMENON IN COLONIAL AUSTRALIA—THE CASE OF ANNA MARIA QUINN, 1854–1858

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THIS ARTICLE INVESTIGATES the cultural and scientific discourses that informed journalistic commentary about a young child actor as a key to understanding conceptions of the human mind in the 1850s. The publicity about Anna Maria Quinn (1848–1920), one of the most significant child players of Shakespeare ever to appear in colonial Australia, suggests a heightening awareness of childhood in mid-nineteenth-century Australia. It involved, to some degree, not only the recognition of the infant prodigy as a child, but also the construction of a loose consensus of what defined childhood. Reportage such as that about Anna Maria Quinn indicates that journalists defined infant prodigies primarily by what they were not: ordinary. Press accounts suggest that young individuals demonstrating exceptionalism distinguished themselves by virtue of their uniqueness, implying the existence of a common understanding of the characteristics defining the “ordinary” child.

Six-year-old, American-born Anna Maria Quinn captured the attention of Australian colonial journalists soon after her arrival in Sydney, Australia, from San Francisco aboard the schooner *Spray* on 18 December 1854. Following her debut on 26 December, the settlement’s theater critics claimed that Quinn lived up to her reputation as a prodigy; many journalists replicated the popular opinion of their American counterparts that she represented “the most extraordinary example of infant talent that has ever made itself public.”¹

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1. *Melbourne Argus*, 17 July 1855.

Initially, Sydney journalists reserved their lengthiest and most complimentary press for Quinn's Shakespearean performances. Biographical accounts claimed that the child had been born on a Mississippi river boat called the *Duchess* in 1848, and had first appeared as Hamlet in America on 21 June 1854, apparently at San Francisco's Metropolitan Theater.² Colonial publications reprinted the opinion of San Francisco's *Golden Era* that Quinn's performance as Hamlet was dramatically remarkable. "It was literally true that she took the house by storm," claimed one reporter, "for she rendered it [Hamlet] in so truly a wonderful and meritorious manner as to disturb all previous notions of theatrical excellence."³ Quinn presented one of her first Australian performances as Hamlet at J. P. Hammond's Royal Lyceum Theater, Sydney, on 29 December 1854. That occasion attracted, according to the *Sydney Illustrated News*, "a large audience, who were surprised and delighted beyond measure at the evidently just conception she had of this difficult character."⁴

Quinn successfully sustained a popular and well-documented career as a theatrical prodigy by performing one-act selections from a range of Shakespearean plays: *Hamlet* (Act 1), *King John* (Act 3, and occasionally Act 4), *Richard III*, *The Merchant of Venice* (as Shylock in Act 4: the "Grand Trial Scene"), and *Macbeth*.⁵ Quinn's repertoire also included a variety of popular pieces such as *A Nabob for an Hour* (as Dick Numpy), *Paul Pry*, *Oliver Twist*, *Actress of All Work* (as Maria), and *The Little Treasure* (as Gertrude).⁶ Other parts included a miniature Lady Gay Spanker in Dion Boucicault's comedy *London Assurance* (1841), Edward (a "male" part) in Mark Lemon's domestic drama *Grandfather Whitehead* (1842), and Master Bob Nettles (another "male" role) in Tom Taylor's comic drama *To Parents and Guardians* (1845).⁷

2. *Sydney Illustrated News* (1854), "Anna Maria Quinn," as quoted in the *Hobart Courier* (17 April 1855).

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Sydney Illustrated News* (1854), as quoted in in the *Hobart Courier* (2 February 1855).

5. *Bathurst Free Press*, 24 February 1855.

6. John Poole, *A Nabob for an Hour* (London: S. French, c.1800); John Poole, *Paul Pry* (London: T.H. Lacy, c.1800); perhaps C.Z. Barnett's adaptation (London: T.H. Lacy, 1838) of C. Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (London: R. Bentley, 1838); W.H. Oxberry, *The Actress of All Work* (London, J. Duncombe, c.1840); A. Harris, *The Little Treasure* (New York: S. French, c.1880).

7. Dion Boucicault, *London Assurance* (London: S. French, 1841); M. Lemon, *Grandfather Whitehead* (London: Webster and Co, c.1840); T. Taylor, *To Parents and Guardians* (London: T.H. Lacy, 1846).



Figure 1: “The effect of her [Anna Maria’s] acting upon the minds of an excitable and admiring public,” claimed the *Melbourne Punch* somewhat sardonically, “was almost indescribable. Bill-brokers, have become on a sudden so tender hearted . . . A susceptible Chinaman, cut off his pig-tail, and flung it on the stage, at the feet of the heart-subduing actress.”⁸

On her Australian tour, Quinn presented one of the earliest “juvenile” performances of *Hamlet* in 1854 and introduced a number of plays never seen before on the continent.⁹ One Melbourne publication reported Quinn’s version of *Paul the*

8. “Papers from the Portfolio of ‘Melbourne Punch’; Punch’s Popular Biographies No. 1, Miss Anna Maria Quinn,” *Melbourne Punch*, 1856, 29. See also “Papers from the Portfolio of ‘Melbourne Punch’; Punch’s Popular Biographies No. 1, Miss Anna Maria Quinn,” *Melbourne Age* 24 August 1855.

9. John Golder and Richard Madelaine note that on 27 December 1854 at the Royal Lyceum theater, Sydney, “6-year-old American child phenomenon Anna Maria Quinn plays *Hamlet* (Act I) for the second time” (see *O Brave New World: Two Centuries of Shakespeare on the Australian Stage*, eds John Golder and Richard Madelaine [Sydney: Currency Press, 2000], 259).

Pet of Petticoats a premiere in 1855, and another promoted the production of *Oliver Twist* as another colonial premiere in 1856.¹⁰ The piece itself was adapted in Australia for Quinn by the popular dramatist Frank Fowler. Fowler's adaptation for Quinn of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—entitled *Eva, or Leaves from Uncle Tom's Cabin*—was another Australian premiere.¹¹ One source even reported that “Fowler had the honour of being called before the curtain at nearly every performance” during the play's two-week run at Sydney's Lyceum Theater in August and September 1856.¹² Later, Quinn appeared in “a new and original farce, written expressly for her” by Thomas John Williams (1824–1874), entitled *Out to Nurse* (1857).¹³

The nineteenth-century tendency to measure a child player's success at imitating adult dramatic traditions had its roots in the reception of the English-born child actor William Henry West Betty (1791–1874). Australian colonial critics followed their Imperial counterparts in hailing him “the young Roscius” in homage to the Roman actor Quintus Roscius Gallus (c. 126–162 BC).¹⁴ Betty reportedly first appeared in Belfast, Ireland, at the age of twelve; legend has it that he committed the part of Hamlet to memory in just three hours. Perhaps the first Australian theater review to liken Quinn's “genius” to the “scientific savans [sic] puzzled over by Master Henry Betty” materialized in Tasmania's *Hobart Courier* on 10 April 1855.¹⁵ Quinn even acquired a distinctly Tasmanian evocation of Betty's fame as “the Roscius in petticoats.”¹⁶ The blurring of gender in the expression here is noteworthy because it measures her theatrical credibility against

10. The *Melbourne Age* claimed *Paul the Pet of Petticoats* a premiere on 10 August 1855 and *Bell's Life in Sydney*, on 7 September 1856, claimed the production of *Oliver Twist* as “for the first time in this colony . . . (dramatized from Charles Dickens' celebrated work).” See *Pet of the Petticoats* in J. B. Baldwin, *Popular Dramas . . . as Performed at the Metropolitan Theatres* (London: Strange, 1835).

11. See *Melbourne Age*, 10 August 1855. Frank Fowler's adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was staged at Our Lyceum Theater, Sydney, between 25 August and 3 September 1856 (see *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 30 August 1856). Also see V. Kelly, ed., *Annotated Calendar of Plays Premiered in Australia 1850–1869: An Interim Publication of the Australian Drama Project 1850–1900* (Queensland: University of Queensland, 1995).

12. Humphrey Hall and Alfred J. Cripps, *The Romance of the Sydney Stage by Osric* (Paddington: Currency Press, 1996), 228.

13. *Melbourne Age*, 12 May 1858. See Th. J. Williams, *Out to Nurse* (Boston: W.V. Spencer, c.1857).

14. *Hobart Courier*, 10 April 1855.

15. Many journalists termed Quinn's abilities “genius.” See *Melbourne Argus*, 21 July 1855; *Ballarat Times*, 24 October 1856, among others.

16. *Hobart Courier*, 5 June 1855.

a specific (male) actor of exceptional ability, but casts her identity as categorically female in the comparison.

Quinn was not the only child appearing on the colonial stage in the mid-1850s, but she was acclaimed as its brightest star. Among rivals was Catherine Hayes, called Miss King, a “delicious *cantatrice*.”¹⁷ Hayes possessed “an amount of natural ability which is rarely exhibited by children of her age.”¹⁸ Quinn inspired two imitators in Tasmania immediately following her tour in 1855, Master Drury, “a boy of singularly precocious dramatic instinct,” and Helen Mackenzie, a nine-year-old promoted as “the Young Tasmanian Prodigy.”¹⁹ Master Drury appeared in the play *Tom Thumb in Tasmania* (c. 1855) just before the debut appearance of Helen Mackenzie as Hamlet.²⁰ Publicity promoted Master Drury as a Tasmanian “local” before his appearance as “a lilliputian hero.”²¹ Mackenzie’s press claimed she “equals, if not excels, the ‘Phenomenon’ Miss Anna Maria Quinn.”²² Mackenzie’s debut presentation in the role of Hamlet seemed strategic. It followed closely Quinn’s roadmap to fame, because the part was “invariably chosen as the test by which actors of larger growth ground their claims to histrionic fame.”²³ Neither Mackenzie nor Drury, however, seriously rivaled Quinn’s dramatic or commercial success. Whereas scores of children and adults lined the carriageways approaching a Tasmanian theater and “absolutely cheered” Quinn “on her passage through the streets” (while Mayor of Melbourne, John Thomas Smith, Esq., even attended one of Quinn’s performances “in full civic costume”), both Mackenzie and Drury disappeared from the stage immediately following their respective debuts.²⁴

17. *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 14 October 1854.

18. *Melbourne Argus*, 6 July 1855.

19. See *Hobart Courier*, 21 September 1855, and *Hobart Mercury*, 18 September 1855, respectively.

20. Master Drury’s promotion as “another infant debutante” (*Mercury*, 21 September 1855) alongside Helen Mackenzie may imply that he was around the same age (about nine years old).

21. The *Hobart Mercury* on 21 September 1855 qualified that Master Drury was a “local” by giving his residential address as “Liverpool-street,” Hobart (*Hobart Mercury*, 18 September 1855).

22. *Courier*, 18 September 1855.

23. *Hobart Courier*, 22 September 1855.

24. See *Hobart Courier*, 9 May 1855 and *Hobart Courier*, 19 May 1855, respectively.

Neither was the child actor Master Pole a prodigy. A critic for the *Melbourne Argus* claimed that “Master Pole has no genius, and not much talent.”²⁵ Pole’s repertoire was similar to Quinn’s, including performances as the name parts in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, and *Richard III*. Pole occasionally performed opposite another “infant prodigy” called Kate O’Reilly. She appeared in Shakespearean parts such as Lady Macbeth to the Macbeth of Pole in Pleasant Creek, on the goldfields, on 28 May 1858.

Quinn’s closest rival was in all likelihood Julia Matthews (c. 1838–1876), her so-called “sister ‘star’.”²⁶ Julia arrived in Sydney from London in August 1854, four months before Quinn’s colonial debut. Publicity claimed Matthews an “infant prodigy” after her first appearance at Sydney’s Royal Victoria Theater on 28 August. At least twelve years old (and possibly sixteen!), she was almost twice Quinn’s age.²⁷ Julia performed one of Quinn’s signature parts, that of Little Pickle in Isaac Bickerstaff(e)’s *The Spoiled Child*.²⁸ In fact, Quinn and Matthews shared a number of common roles. Both, at various times during their Australian careers, performed principal parts in productions such as *Actress of All Work*, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *The Spoiled Child*, and *Middy Ashore*.²⁹ Both toured the Victorian goldfields at the same time (but performing at rival theaters) in the mid- to late 1850s; no longer child actors, they even performed together in 1867.³⁰

Yet unlike Matthews, Quinn’s promotional material during her debut emphasized her pedigree as a gifted tragedienne specializing in Shakespeare, whereas Matthews’ forte at this time was as a dancer. Quinn maintained her position as a legitimate “star” considering she specialized in “legitimate” drama, which Michael

25. *Melbourne Argus*, 2 September 1858.

26. *Bell’s Life in Sydney*, 3 February 1855.

27. See “Old Times. From the Papers of Fifty Years Ago,” *Evening News*, 3 September 1904. Katharine Brisbane contends that Matthews arrived in Australia in 1854 aged twelve years old, implying she was born c. 1842. See Katharine Brisbane, ed., *Entertaining Australia: An Illustrated History* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1991), 50. Other sources claim she was born in 1842. See *Daily Mirror*, 16 January 1980.

28. I. Bickerstaff, *The Spoil’d Child* (Dublin: The Booksellers, 1792).

29. Fowler’s work may have been an original play or an adaptation of George L. Aiken, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, ed. Th. Riis (New York: Garland, 1994 [first edition: 1852]); W.B. Bernard, *The Middy Ashore* (London: T.H. Lacy, c. 1836); Oxberry, *The Actress*; Bickerstaff, *The Spoil’d Child*.

30. Victorian press clippings indicate that Quinn and Matthews appeared in productions together in both Melbourne city and provincial areas such as Ballarat (see *Bell’s Life in Victoria*, 5 January 1867).

R. Booth defines as “farce, tragedy and comedy.”³¹ Also unlike Matthews, journalists regularly asserted Quinn’s talents as “genius” and claimed her Shakespearean characterizations surpassed the presentations of more mature, adult, players. While one reporter, for instance, claimed Quinn conceptualized Hamlet so eloquently as to “shame the performance of many an adult actor,” another surpassed him in stating that she excelled as a tragedienne where most mature actors had failed.³² “Her cast of Hamlet is remarkably well conceived, and which to our thinking,” wrote this critic, “more than one of the most celebrated male tragedians, sadly misrepresent.”³³ This echoed earlier sentiments that “her delivery of some of Shakespeare’s finest passages would shame the performance of many an adult actor on the Sydney boards.”³⁴

One writer summed Quinn’s talent up as follows:

[T]he Roscius in petticoats, Miss Anna Maria Quinn . . . is engaged to come out at Black’s new theater [Melbourne]. Thus the Victorians may probably have an opportunity of witnessing the remarkable contrast (never perhaps to be seen again in the brief span of a single life) between the histrionic acquirements of Gustavus Brooke, the full-grown man, the popular old stager, and the incipient efforts of a girl of tender years.³⁵

The claim is particularly interesting in its allusion to gender and professionalism. Quinn was compared here to an illustrious actor, Irish-born Gustavus Vaughn Brooke (1818–1866), who reigned as the most celebrated tragedian in the Australian colonies. This review directed attention to Quinn’s potential, her “incipient efforts,” in the same breath as “the greatest actor of the age,” indicative of the high value critics placed on her as an exceptionally talented actress.³⁶ The comparison between child and adult, girl and man has a distinct and dramatic effect: the success of “the incipient efforts of a girl of tender years” pitted against the theatrical accomplishments of “the full-grown man, the popular old stager.”

31. Michael R. Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 6.

32. *Sydney Illustrated News*, (no date [December 1854?]). As published in the *Hobart Courier*, 2 February 1855.

33. *Hobart Mercury*, 11 April 1855.

34. *Hobart Courier*, 17 April 1855.

35. *Ibid.*, 5 June 1855.

36. *Ibid.*, 10 June 1856.

The sheer quantity of Quinn's press, her high media visibility, and the prominence of her popularity all indicate that she raised the bar for the child players who followed. One critic contended that she was, considering "her extreme youth . . . beyond any comparison that could be instituted with any other infant actor or actress of our time."³⁷ Another reviewer claimed her "features and figure, her elocution, action, by play, and accurate acquaintance with the language appropriate to her part [as Hamlet] impress even those who, like ourselves are averse to all infant prodigies."³⁸ The *Hobart Courier* asserted how "[i]n such prodigies, generally speaking, we have no faith," but in Quinn it recognized a "singularly gifted child."³⁹ Another critic replicated those sentiments two years later, claiming "*La petite* Quinn is the embodiment of an amount of genuine talent of which those who have been bored with the precocious marvels that periodically appear for a short season, can have no conception."⁴⁰

Perhaps because she was younger, had already established an international reputation, and toured the Australian colonies more widely than her contemporaries, critics focused more attention on Anna Maria's performances than on appearances by other child players such as Helen Mackenzie, Julia Matthews, Master Pole, and Kate O'Reilly. There is an obvious disparity, for instance, when comparing the media attention given to Anna Maria and Julia Matthews in goldfield towns such as Ballarat, where both appeared, but at rival theaters, in 1856. Matthews does attract press as "a prodigy," but Quinn's reviews are typically longer (up to three times in some instances), with more detailed descriptions of her performances.⁴¹

Quinn also seemed in part responsible for a shift toward appreciating well-trained child performers as artists. Her reception in colonial Australia as an "artiste" seemed to reject the opinions of some commentators that child actors and actresses were not necessarily artists. Where one colonial journalist claimed Quinn a "juvenile *artiste*—consciously we may emphasise the word," American activists would later contend that "the child, simply because it is not an artist, breaks through the illusion which the stage is producing and reaches the audience

37. See *Melbourne Argus*, 21 July 1855, and *Melbourne Argus*, 3 August 1855, respectively.

38. *Melbourne Age*, 20 July 1855.

39. *Hobart Courier*, 8 April 1855.

40. *Ballarat Times*, 25 March 1857.

41. *Ballarat Times*, 28 October 1856. Also see *Ballarat Times*, October and November 1856.

with a certain—shall we say, touch of nature?—to which the audience responds very quickly.”⁴²

There is evidence suggesting that the popular and critical response to Quinn similarly placed more pressure on child players promoted as prodigies to match the originality and freshness of Quinn’s performance style. According to one critic, “[s]triking, startling genius only can justify the exhibition of juvenile precocity.”⁴³ Reportage in reference to fourteen-year-old Master Pole, performing at Melbourne’s Theatre Royal, and Miss Kate O’Reilly, around the same age, simultaneously performing at Melbourne’s Princess’s Theatre, presents two cases in point. While Pole performed a Shakespearean tragedy, and O’Reilly a melodrama by Douglas Jerrold (*Martha Willis, or the Servant-maid!*), both prodigies appeared within three months of Quinn.⁴⁴ A critic suggested of Pole that “[a] *Hamlet* of fourteen years of age, and suffering from chronic catarrh, or a natural inability to distinguish between *M* and *B*, can only excite ridicul[e], if it do not provoke pity; such a performance is beyond the limits of genuine criticism.”⁴⁵ The same review claimed of O’Reilly’s performance that “[i]f ungraceful striding about and hysterical struggles were evidences of excellent acting, Miss O’Reilly would have the highest title to this quality.”⁴⁶

Critics continued to qualify Quinn’s genius as the genuine article until her Australian departure in 1857, offering without hesitation that “the word phenomenon is certainly justly given to this precocious child.”⁴⁷ Quinn departed Australia as a “histrionic celebrity,” in March 1857.⁴⁸ She appeared at London’s Haymarket theater in September 1857 and at Burton’s Theater, New York, in

42. *Ibid.*, 25 March 1857. Jane Addams, “Child Labor on the Stage,” *Symposium—Child Labor on the Stage*, Birmingham, Alabama, 9–12 March 1911 (American Academy of Political Social Science: Philadelphia, 1911), 4.

43. *Melbourne Argus*, 2 September 1858.

44. The critic doubted that Douglas Jerrold had written *Martha Willis, or the Servant-maid!* (see *Melbourne Argus*, 2 September 1858). See D. W. Jerrold, *Martha Willis* (London: T. H. Lacy, c.1831).

45. See *Melbourne Argus*, 2 September 1858.

46. *Ibid.*

47. *Hobart Courier*, 11 February 1857. A critic for the *Melbourne Age* also described Quinn as a “precocious child.” See *Melbourne Age*, 18 July 1855.

48. See *Melbourne Herald* via the *Ballarat Times*, 26 March 1857, and *Cornwall Chronicle* (Launceston), 14 February 1857, respectively.

November 1857.⁴⁹ She returned to Australia in 1858 at nine years old, appearing less frequently as a performer of Shakespeare and more often as a comic actress.⁵⁰ She appeared in “a high pressure Yankee farce” called *Our Jeremy* on 10 May 1858 at Melbourne’s Theater Royal to unfavorable reviews.⁵¹ “To our English taste,” wrote the *Age* critic, “Americanisms are exaggerated enough at all times, and however well the farce may be adapted to a New York audience, to us it appears a distortion of the grotesque.”⁵² On Monday 17 May (under the patronage of his Excellency the Governor Sir Henry Barkly, K.C.B.), she performed the character of Nan in John Baldwin Buckstone (1802–1879)’s farce *Nan, the Good for Nothing* (1851) “with the house full to overflowing.”⁵³ Then, after a complimentary benefit for American-born actress Mary Provost on 19 June 1858, the press announced Quinn’s intention to withdraw from the stage “for the purpose of completing her education.”⁵⁴ As for her Shakespearean parts, Quinn only appeared in a one-off presentation as Prince Arthur in *King John* on 29 May at Melbourne’s Theater Royal.

Anna Maria returned to Australia in 1864, aged sixteen, having reappeared on stage at London’s Haymarket Theater in November 1863.⁵⁵ She performed in Melbourne throughout May 1864 in companies supporting the more notable touring stars of the period such as the American Joseph Jefferson (1829–1905) and the English husband-and-wife duo Charles and Ellen Kean. Later, in 1866, Quinn reappeared as Mrs. O’Neill, having recently married an Irish comedian named William O’Neill (1837–1868). It apparently proved a less than happy union. A report in November 1867 that Anna Maria had sailed out of Sydney aboard the *Callao* bound for San Francisco included the notice that William was

49. See “Miss Maria Quin, the clever juvenile Australian actress,” *Theatrical Journal* 1, 928 (Wednesday, 23 September 1857): 302–3; *New York Times*, 14 November 1857.

50. Quinn arrived in Melbourne direct from Boston aboard the *Revenue* on 29 April 1858. See shipping intelligence in the *Melbourne Argus*, 30 April 1858.

51. *Melbourne Age*, 11 May 1858. I have been unable to find an author or publication date for this play.

52. *Ibid.*

53. *Melbourne Age*, 18 May 1858. J. Baldwin Buckstone, *Good For Nothing* (New York: S. French, 1851). Other presentations in May 1858 included lead roles in *Oliver Twist* and *Paul Pry*.

54. *Melbourne Age*, 21 June 1858. At this time, “about one-half of children aged between eight and twelve attended school at any particular time” in Australia, even if that says little about Quinn, who was American (Michael Roe, “1830–50,” in *A New History of Australia*, ed. Frank Crowley [Melbourne: William Heinemann, 1974], 113).

55. *Empire*, 23 November 1863.

to follow his wife after concluding a short season in Sydney.⁵⁶ He never did. William O'Neill died in 1868 at the age of thirty-one, possibly from complications connected to alcoholism. By then, prosecutors had charged Anna Maria with four counts of larceny in New Zealand after actresses in her theater company accused her of stealing jewellery and a handkerchief in September 1867.⁵⁷ She appears to have avoided incarceration.

Quinn appears never to have returned to Australia, though she married again in 1874, settling for a time in relative obscurity as Mrs. Watson (in Memphis, Tennessee).⁵⁸ She returned to the stage, however, during the 1880s, appearing at the Liberty Theater.⁵⁹ According to a private letter from the New York Public Library addressed to Australian theater historian Eric Irvin, Quinn died on 26 April 1920 under another name, that of Mrs. Samuel Charles, implying that she must have married a third time.⁶⁰

The praise with which journalists lauded Quinn throughout her first Australian tour marked her as an exceptional child compared to her theatrical peers. Her extensive press as a “wonderful instance of infant genius” included a distinctive catalogue of complimentary epithets.⁶¹ Among these were “precocious genius,” “star,” “prodigy,” “infant phenomenon,” and “singularly gifted child.”⁶² A perusal of the contemporary Australian press shows no evidence of as broad a taxonomy of terms in press depictions of the other colonial child players promoted as theatrical prodigies during this period.

Yet the tendency among contemporary journalists toward an inconsistent and often interchangeable use of such terms as genius, prodigy, infant, and child raises the question: What did contemporaries mean by such terms in relation to talented

56. *Bell's Life in Victoria*, 16 November 1867.

57. *Bell's Life in Victoria*, 21 September 1867.

58. *Australian*, 14 November 1874.

59. *Bulletin*, 22 October 1880.

60. New York Public Library letter to Eric Irvin, 26 August 1982 (see *Eric Irvin Collection, National Library of Australia*).

61. *Melbourne Argus*, 21 July 1855.

62. See *Ballarat Times*, 24 October 1856; *Hobart Courier*, 17 April 1855; *Hobart Courier*, 18 September 1855; *Hobart Courier*, 11 April 1855; “Papers from the Portfolio of ‘Melbourne Punch’: Punch’s Popular Biographies No. 1, Miss Anna Maria Quinn,” *Melbourne Punch*, 1856; and *Hobart Courier*, 6 April 1855.

young theater performers of the period? This commentary also tells us something about the social significance of the actor, as outlined in Joseph R. Roach's *The Player's Passion*, the edited collection *Performance Studies*, or Erving Goffman's *Frame Analysis*.⁶³ To begin with the latter, Quinn's popularity as a theatrical prodigy verifies that she represented a powerful agent of social mobilization. Her celebrity as a performer coupled with the volume of her reportage provides a useful "frame" to explore the encounter between audience and "this pretty little star."⁶⁴ As Goffman defines it, "a frame [is] any device or convention which allows certain messages or symbols to be set apart and considered to have a special relationship to everyday reality."⁶⁵ This aspect of Quinn's publicity set her performances apart as maintaining a singular relationship to the day-to-day lives of Australian colonial inhabitants. Press reports promoted Quinn's appearances as conjuring up a different world, one that suspended the humdrum existence of everyday colonial life. She was "a truly wonderful little girl, a prodigy," promised the *Hobart Courier*, "which may not appear again in the longest lifetime."⁶⁶ Such publicity urged social mobilization and emphasized that audiences (whether the "most respectable families," "persons from the country," or "her admiring public") had in seeing Quinn a unique opportunity to experience an out-of-the-ordinary cultural event.⁶⁷ "We recommend our fellow-citizens—in truth and in earnestness—to go there [the theater], as we feel satisfied that no such phenomenon has yet appeared in the colonies."⁶⁸ Writers of this type of promotion offered a counterpoint to the reportage informed by psychological theorizing. Writers urging social mobilization fashioned a construct of the gifted child as wonderfully magical and innately adorable. It was not so much her cognitive exceptionality that figured as key in this genre of publicity, but her success at appealing directly

63. J.R. Roach, *The Player's Passion* (Newark: U. of Delaware P., 1985); E. Striff, ed., *Performance Studies* (Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003); E. Goffman, *Frame Analysis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1974).

64. *Hobart Courier*, 17 April 1855.

65. See the discussion of Erving Goffman's *Frame Analysis* in Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 219–20.

66. See *Hobart Courier*, 10 April, 12 April, and 11 April 1855, respectively.

67. See *Ibid.*, 5 May and 11 April 1855, respectively. A number of publications reprinted "Papers from the Portfolio of 'Melbourne Punch'," including the *Melbourne Age*, 24 August 1855, and the *Hobart Courier* on 11 September 1855, which is consistent with her popularity in Tasmania.

68. *Sydney Illustrated News* (no date [December 1854?]), as published in the *Hobart Courier*, 2 February 1855.

to the human heart. This sort of portrayal focused specifically on her gender as a little girl as particularly, and magically, appealing. One publication claimed that while in Sydney, Quinn “[won] her way into the hearts of the audience with a magic [which] there is no resisting.”⁶⁹ Another asserted that in Melbourne she “succeeded for three quarters of an hour, not only in occupying the attention, but the hearts, of the audience.”⁷⁰

But the psychological aspects of Quinn’s portrayal in the contemporary Australian press are perhaps most intriguing. The approach adopted in the following analysis does not attempt to trace the history of psychology as a social science, but recognizes the significance of various psychological theories posited to express and interpret Quinn’s exceptionality. The brief overview of the general development of psychology in the era of Quinn’s Australian debut intends to situate her reception within the psychological discourse emerging in the press at the time. Her portrayal in newspapers and magazines was informed by early- to mid-nineteenth-century scientific ideas, but challenged received wisdom about the human mind’s operation. Additionally, the discourse about Quinn’s precocious talent reveals the use of specific terminology about highly gifted performers. Some of the points made below remain tentative, bearing in mind Nancy M. Robinson’s warning that, although biographers and philosophers have exhibited an interest in advanced intelligence in children for centuries, the sources themselves are narrow, and the material retrospective and selective.⁷¹ Emily Cahan et al. suggest likewise that the “historian of childhood must be far more resourceful than others, testing evidence and meaning from unlikely sources.”⁷²

The Corsini Encyclopedia of Psychology and Behavioral Science borrows from Phillippe Müller’s *The Tasks of Childhood* (1969) to identify four historical “stages” in cultural conceptions of the family and changing perceptions of the child.⁷³ This text proceeds to locate a growing interest in childhood in observa-

69. *Bell’s Life in Sydney*, 3 February 1855.

70. *Melbourne Argus*, 19 July 1855.

71. Nancy M. Robinson, “The Early Development of Precocity,” *Gifted Child Quarterly* 31.4 (1987): 161.

72. Emily Cahan, Jay Mechling, Brian Sutton-Smith, and Sheldon H. White, “The elusive historical child: Ways of knowing the child of history and psychology,” in *Children in Time and Place: Developmental and Historical Insights*, eds Glen H. Elder, John Modell, and Ross D. Parke (New York: Cambridge UP, 1993), 192.

73. W. Edward Craighead and Charles B. Nemeroff, *The Corsini Encyclopedia of Psychology and Behavioral Science* (New York: Wiley, 2001), 281; Ph. Müller, *The Tasks of Childhood* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969).

tional studies, sometimes called biographies, from the late eighteenth century onward. These works had as their subjects the biological children of the authors themselves. Dietrich Tiedemann's study (1781), Charles Darwin's *A Biographical Sketch of an Infant* (1877), and Wilhelm Preyer's *Die Seele des Kindes* ("The Mind of the Child") (1882)—the first extensive observational study of the first three years of life—are identified as the most commonly cited examples.⁷⁴ That biographical observational studies exist at all largely confirms the general view among historians that a more empirical interest in child and adolescent development emerged in the later nineteenth century.⁷⁵

Social and cultural conceptualizations of the child have undergone continual change and transformation since the Enlightenment and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile*.⁷⁶ Conceptions drew heavily on educational theorizing, philosophy, and early-psychology writings throughout the Pre-Darwinian decades. Where Mary Wollstonecraft's *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) asserted the existence of an innate power of rationality in all children, the basic assumptions of behaviorists drew on the English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704)'s notion of a newborn child as a blank slate, or *tabula rasa*, to emphasize environment over biological variables on development.⁷⁷ The nineteenth century witnessed changing attitudes to children and childhood in light of changes to social life coinciding with the rise of urbanization and industrialization.⁷⁸ In his "child as a chattel" thesis, Dugald McDonald, for example, constructs a pre-1900 concept of the child

74. See F. Louis Soldan, ed. and trans., *Tiedemann's Record of Infant-Life* (Syracuse, N.Y.: C. Bardeen, 1890); C. Darwin, "A Biographical Sketch of an Infant," *Mind* 2, 1877: 285–94; W.T. Preyer, *Die Seele des Kindes*, Leipzig: T. Grieben, 1895 [4th ed., original: 1882].

75. See Phillip T. Slee, *Child, Adolescent and Family Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 4, and W. L. I. Parry-Jones, "The History of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry: Its Present Day Relevance," *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 1 (1989): 5.

76. J.J. Rousseau, *Émile, ou de L'éducation* (Amsterdam: n.p., 1762). See for Rousseau's ideas and influence Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation. The Science of Freedom* (New York: Norton, 1969), 543–4.

77. Erling Eng, "Locke's Tabula Rasa and Freud's 'Mystic Writing Pad,'" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 41.1 (1980): 133–40; M. Wollstonecraft, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (London: J. Johnson, 1787); J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1995 [1690]).

78. As also reflected in the related area of childhood pedagogy by the contemporary works of people like Friedrich Fröbel (1782–1852) (see for example F. Fröbel, *Gesammelte pädagogische Schriften* [Berlin: Enslin, 1862–3]).

in New Zealand (and thus by extension in Australia) as the property of the family, with no state or bureaucratic interest or rights of intervention.⁷⁹

Clinical psychology, too, saw concepts of the child rapidly evolving after 1800. During the mid- to the late nineteenth century, the influence of Darwinism in the cognitive sciences motivated the development of various specializations in the field of psychology, including child psychology. Darwin's *Biographical Sketch of an Infant* represented, according to Parry-Jones, an important contribution to stabilizing the concept from the point of view of psychology.⁸⁰ And some historians of experimental psychology consider Stanley Hall (1844–1924)'s *Contents of Children's Minds* (1893) as the pioneer in the field that established the Child-Study Movement.⁸¹

It was during this period that a psychological interest in genius began to inform social and clinical constructions of the gifted child within domestic and familial surroundings. Francis Galton's *Inherent Nature of Genius* (sometimes "Hereditary Genius") (1869) was the first systematic study of the families of highly intelligent individuals.⁸² Other contributors to the field later in the era included Joseph Jastrow's "Genius and Precocity" (1888).⁸³ Roblyn Rawlins has examined the shifting social and clinical constructions of early or precocious intellectual development in children, claiming that the view of precocity began as a clinical or psychological problem in the early nineteenth century and transformed into an exciting intellectual challenge in the post-1930s.⁸⁴ Joseph Kett similarly locates the

79. Dugald McDonald, "Children and Young Persons in New Zealand Society," in *Families in New Zealand Society*, ed. P. G. Koopman-Boyden (New Zealand: Methuen, 1978).

80. Parry-Jones, "The History," 5.

81. G. Stanley Hall, *Contents of Children's Minds on Entering Schools* (New York and Chicago: E. L. Kellogg and co., 1893); Emily D. Cahan, "Toward a Socially Relevant Science: Notes on the History of Child Development Research," in *When Science Encounters the Child: Education, Parenting, and Child Welfare in 20th Century America*, eds Barbara Beatty, Emily D. Cahan, and Julia Grant (New York: Teachers College Press, Teachers College, Columbia University, 2006), 16–34, 17.

82. Allen W. Gottfried, Adele Eskeles Gottfried, Kay Bathurst, and Diana Wright Guerin, *Gifted IQ: Early Developmental Aspects: the Fullerton Longitudinal Study* (New York: Plenum, 1994), 23; F. Galton, *Hereditary Genius* (London: MacMillan, 1869).

83. Joseph Jastrow, "Genius and Precocity," *Christian Union* 37 (1888): 264–6.

84. Roblyn Rawlins, "Raising 'Precocious' Children: From Nineteenth Century Pathology to Twentieth-Century Potential," in *When Science Encounters the Child*, eds Beatty et al., 77–95.

term “precocity” historically and describes its identification as a kind of disorder in children requiring intervention and curative treatment.⁸⁵ Kett claims that:

The heightened awareness of childhood in early nineteenth-century America involved not only a recognition of the organic character of human growth, but also a tendency toward preserving juvenile innocence rather than stimulating children to imitate adults. The celebration of juvenile innocence, in turn, produced the fear of precocity so pervasive in nineteenth-century thought.⁸⁶

Contemporary media publications such as the daily *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* indicate an ambivalent use of “precocity.” One issue uses the term to refer to a fourteen-year-old horse thief.⁸⁷ Another claimed “Precocity is generally the result of a morbid condition of this organ [the brain], either functional or organic.”⁸⁸ An earlier contribution to the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* by the same author, Dr. S. B. Woodward, prescribed the immediate confiscation of books in favor of open-air play or manual labor should a child exhibit any “symptoms of precocity.”⁸⁹

But Anna Maria Quinn’s publicity in nineteenth-century colonial Australia draws attention to journalists’ use of the term precocity to identify children exhibiting advanced intellectual and artistic ability, rather than designating an aberrant or pathological condition. Similarly, while Borland argues that there was no concept of giftedness in the nineteenth century, Quinn’s publicity as a “singularly gifted child” implies otherwise: Journalists in nineteenth-century colonial Australia displayed some understanding of childhood giftedness.⁹⁰

Reading about Quinn’s reception aids our insight into the contemporary attitude toward female child prodigies, who remain much less studied than their male counterparts. While journalists only occasionally referred to Quinn’s gender, her

85. Joseph F. Kett, “Curing the Disease of Precocity,” in *Turning Points*, eds John Demos and Sarane Spence Boocock, *American Journal of Sociology* 84 (1978): 183–211.

86. Joseph F. Kett, “Adolescence and Youth in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2 (1971): 286.

87. *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 18 June 1869.

88. Dr. S. B. Woodward, “Treatment of Children at School,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 30 March 1850.

89. Dr. S. B. Woodward, “Treatment of Scholars,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 8 December 1846.

90. James H. Borland, “Gifted Education Without Gifted Children: *The Case for No Conception of Giftedness*,” in *Conceptions of Giftedness*, eds Robert J. Sternberg and Janet E. Davidson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1–19. The *Hobart Courier* of 8 April 1855 promoted Quinn as a “singularly gifted child.”



Figure 2: This illustration of the then six-year-old Anna Maria Quinn as Hamlet appeared in San Francisco’s *Golden Era*, 2 July 1854. An Australian journalist claimed she delivered Hamlet’s soliloquy, “‘Oh that this too, too solid flesh would melt, thaw, and resolve itself into a dew’ [Act I, scene ii] . . . in a masterly manner”, and the “Angels and ministers of grace defend us” speech (Act I, scene iv) “was rendered and spoken with deep pathos and emotion.”⁹¹ Here she appears as “male” by virtue of her role and corresponding theatrical garb.

portrayal in illustrations offers some clues as to how illustrators of the period positioned and identified her as a gendered subject. Illustrators typically fashioned images of her characterizing her best-known roles, mainly playing men or boys,

91. *Ballarat Times*, 24 October 1856.

and dressed in the appropriate garb. Such images suppress her sex. The character emerging in such texts is of an ambivalent, or perhaps even shifting, gender identity. Quinn, six years old at the commencement of her Australian tour, was still at an age and level of physical maturity when it was possible to safely market her androgyny and talent to perform both male and female roles. The category of child subsumed the gendered one, and it could be that her specialty as a player of tragic Shakespearean male roles and male parts in popular pieces suppressed her female identity. It is likely that the images accompanying her publicity deliberately obscured her gender in order to capitalize on a more commercially lucrative category, that of a gifted child actor. Quinn was thus a child prodigy who falls outside the more usual categories of the study of precocious children, of those who excel in mathematics, chess, art, and music. Her unique qualities help us understand the phenomenon of largely overlooked expressions of advanced proficiency, such as in drama and theatrical skill.

Contemporary philosophical and psychological theories informed the press about Quinn. The consistent usage of terms such as precocity, genius, and prodigy indicates that colonial journalists borrowed from emergent cognitive theories in popularizing conceptualizations about gifted child actors. Furthermore, the portrayal of Quinn allows us to explore the ways in which Australian journalists introduced scientific ideas, such as those of “double” or “divided” consciousness, and several pseudoscientific practices allegedly relevant to Quinn’s giftedness and popularity, such as mesmerism, phrenology, and imitation. Theater critics regularly raised the question of Quinn’s cognitive intelligence in reviews of her performances. Some theater critics utilized the, now obsolete, medical hermeneutic of so-called “double” or “divided consciousness,” proposed in the writings of Dr. Henry Dewar (c. 1780–1823), to explain her talents. Dewar had trained as a medical doctor, and gained prominence as an eminent figure in his field during the early 1800s.⁹² Dewar wrote and published widely in a variety of clinical fields.⁹³ He served as an honorary member of the historical society of New York, a lecturer on the institutions of medicine, and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. The following reference to Dewar in the writing about Quinn suggests that some theater critics attempted to understand her singularity in terms of this psychological theory:

92. See *Former RSE Fellows 1723–2002*: 47/1, cited http://www.rse.org.uk/fellowship/all_fellows.pdf.

93. See for example Henry Dewar, *The Influence of Chemical Laws on the Phenomena of Physiology* (Edinburgh: n.p., 1821).

[T]here are times in which she passes into a state of *double consciousness*, or, to express ourselves more properly, *divided consciousness*, wherein, to use the language of Dr. Henry Dewar, are exhibited, “two separate and independent trains of thought, and two independent mental capabilities in the same individual; each train of thought and each capability being wholly dis severed from the other.”⁹⁴

This attempt to use Dewar’s psychological dialectics to account for Quinn’s exceptionality is evidence that theater critics attempted to apply emerging psychological theories conceived about adults to gifted children. The journalistic application of such philosophies ignored the clinical contexts which had given birth to those theories. Some journalistic references to divided or double consciousness tried to situate the issue of Quinn’s cognitive awareness within the discourse of duality in mental faculties. Dewar, among others, reported cases of divided personalities, but his conjectures resulted specifically from research into brain disease almost exclusively in adult somnambulists.⁹⁵ Dewar’s suppositions drew on early-nineteenth-century assumptions that closely connected double consciousness to somnambulism.⁹⁶ According to such logic, individuals passing into trance-like states defined “a mode of psychologizing” that relied largely on the principal doctrines of human reason and consciousness.⁹⁷ Demonstrations of somnambulism and mesmerism as popular entertainment were part of the period’s theater culture.⁹⁸ Like the subjects of clinical studies, participants in stage performances “often behaved, or were perceived as behaving, as if they were in some sort of modified trance-state.”⁹⁹

Newspapers and magazines actively promoted Quinn’s mental state as evidence of her exceptionality: “the young, the intelligent, the calm-minded countenance of *Anna Maria Quinn*.”¹⁰⁰ A fascination with the “marvellous science of the mind,” and in particular Quinn’s “calm-mindedness,” drew on popular beliefs

94. *Hobart Courier*, 17 April 1855.

95. A reference to Dr. Henry Dewar can be found in George Combe, “A System of Phrenology,” 2 vols. See John van Wyhe, *The History of Phrenology on the Web*, 27 January 2007, cited at <http://pages.britishlibrary.net/phrenology/>.

96. Ian Hacking, “Divided Consciousness in Britain 1815–1875,” *Dissociation* 3 (1991): 136.

97. Edward Franklin Buchner, “A Quarter of a Century of Psychology in America: 1878–1903,” *American Journal of Psychology* 14 (1903): 666.

98. See Alison Winter, *Mesmerized* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 112–30.

99. Hacking, “Divided Consciousness,” 136.

100. *Hobart Courier*, 8 April 1855.

about mental cognition such as phrenology as outlined in George Combe (1788–1858)’s *System of Phrenology*.¹⁰¹ Combe conjectured about the possibilities of aggregated cerebral spheres in human beings, or what he termed “plural mental faculties.”¹⁰² The allusion to Combe in reference to Quinn’s “independent mental capabilities” suggests another attempt by some journalists to apply current theories of the mature human mind to acute mental precocity in children.¹⁰³

The reporting about Quinn substantiates the argument that the implications of her identification as “gifted” were twofold. On the one hand, it led a number of journalists to question “[u]nder what influence, supernaturally marvellous . . . or otherwise, this young child has imbibed such a clear conception of the actor’s work.”¹⁰⁴ On the other, it invited deliberate theorizing and questioning into the possible reasons explaining Quinn’s exceptionality:

We have been told that the whole is the work of imitation, but don’t believe it. The faculty of imitation cannot pourtray [sic], with fidelity, the diversified workings of the human mind. They are too complicated and varied a character . . . as elicited by the ten thousand circumstances of human existence—[and] must be appreciated before they can be represented.¹⁰⁵

The influence of early theories of imitation can be traced in Quinn’s Australian reportage. Discussions of this type drew on ideas voiced in contemporary works such as Alexander Bain’s *The Senses and the Intellect* (1855).¹⁰⁶ Bain contended that imitation was a learned reaction, as distinct from an innate or inborn behavior. Thus, Bain “was one of the first theorists who rejected the notion . . . that imitative behavior is instinctive.”¹⁰⁷ Anna Maria’s publicity stands out from that of her contemporaries as one of the few child players whose perfor-

101. *Ibid.*, 17 April 1855. See George Combe, *A System of Phrenology* (London: Longman, 1825).

102. See John van Wyhe, *The History of Phrenology on the Web*, cited in <http://pages.britishlibrary.net/phrenology/>, accessed 27 January 2007.

103. *Hobart Courier*, 17 April 1855.

104. *Ibid.*, 5 June 1855.

105. *Bathurst Free Press*, 24 February 1855.

106. A. Bain, *The Senses and the Intellect* (London: J. W. Parker, 1855).

107. Effie Kynissis and Claire L. Poulson, “The History of Imitation in Learning Theory: The Language Acquisition Process,” *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior* 2 (1990): 113–27.

mances critics agreed was not merely “the work of imitation.”¹⁰⁸ Critics distinguished Quinn’s art as the genuine article against that of one contemporary, Master Pole, for instance, who represented, according to one theater critic “a lesson well conned, and delivered with such appropriateness of emphasis and gesture as the mere faculty of mimicry may enable a boy to encompass.”¹⁰⁹

Critics perceived in Quinn no evidence of artificiality, imitation, or mimicry, unlike other child players promoted as prodigies. Rather, critics interpreted Quinn’s skill in characterization as evidence of her capacity to utilize the “diversified workings of the human mind.”¹¹⁰ Although one critic regarded her performances as “chiefly remarkable as an act of memory,” another made a clear case for the application of biological-based theories of the mind to “peculiar,” meaning atypical, children such as Quinn.¹¹¹ “We regard Miss Quinn,” asserted this critic, “as a very extraordinary example of mental precocity which, from a peculiar organisation, develops itself in dramatic representation.”¹¹²

An understanding of the “ordinary” experience of childhood surfaces in Quinn’s reportage as an ambivalence toward the lifestyle of a child prodigy, or in comparative accounts of the lifestyle of child players—even pseudo child prodigies—compared to that of other children. “The spectator regards her [Quinn’s] performances with equal pity and astonishment, astonishment at her capabilities, and pity for a childhood so spent.”¹¹³ It is possible to identify a similar scepticism toward children falsely encouraged as prodigies: “Friends incur a grave responsibility when they permit the untempered ambition of so young a boy [Master Pole] to draw him from natural privacy which ought to surround the early years of existence.”¹¹⁴ Theater journalists speculated that adults encouraging child players falsely promoted as prodigies “produce, by their non-interference, an unreal thing—neither boy nor man; something immature, forced, and disagreeably artificial; and they destroy the fresh heartiness of youthful aspirations.”¹¹⁵ Some critics also voiced concern about the consequences of introducing children

108. *Bathurst Free Press*, 24 February 1855.

109. *Melbourne Argus*, 2 September 1858.

110. *Ibid.*

111. *Melbourne Age*, 11 August 1855.

112. *Bathurst Free Press*, 24 February 1855.

113. *Melbourne Age*, 18 July 1855.

114. *Melbourne Argus*, 2 September 1858.

115. *Ibid.*



Figure 3: Anna Maria Quinn pictured in the *Illustrated Sydney News* playing one of her non-Shakespearian staple roles in William Bayle Bernard's *Middy Ashore* (c. 1837).¹¹⁶ In such roles, she regularly played opposite J. H. Vinson (pictured) her sometime theatrical tutor, "preceptor," and guardian.¹¹⁷

to the stage, of "powers so prematurely developed, and an introduction, so early, to the artificial atmosphere of the stage."¹¹⁸ Others, however, celebrated Quinn's performances "as an exhibition of her knowledge of stage business."¹¹⁹

On the one hand, the contradictions surrounding "the child" in colonial Australia replicated the "age-old concept of childhood . . . [which] regarded children as miniature adults, to be introduced to adult economic responsibilities as early as possible."¹²⁰ On the other, the conflicting constructs of the child in

116. *Illustrated Sydney News*, 20 January 1855.

117. See the *New York Mirror*, 26 November 1881, for J. H. Vinson's obituary.

118. *Melbourne Age*, 18 July 1855.

119. *Melbourne Age*, 11 August 1855.

120. Parry-Jones, "The History," 3. See also P. Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood* (London: Cape, 1962), and the more nuanced H. Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500* (second ed., New York: Pearson, Longman: 2005).

Quinn's reportage, as well as the publicity of her contemporaries, indicates a strong "tendency to sentimentalize childhood."¹²¹ However, Quinn's promotion as a child prodigy exempted her from the expectations required of the ordinary child precisely because "child prodigies are able to do something that is usually accomplished only by adults."¹²² Theater critics therefore promoted her as exceptional by virtue of the dramatic skills she possessed at so young an age, but adhered to the tradition of measuring the very success of her characterizations, particularly in Shakespearian roles, according to the entrenched standards of dramatic praxis expected of adult performers. In these discussions, critics did not define Quinn as a gendered subject, a little girl, but as an actor pure and simple. Theater journalists in this period required Shakespearian performers particularly, whatever their age, to adopt "round tones and regular metre in the speaking of verse."¹²³ These were oratorical fundamentals of style attributed to the great tragedian John Philip Kemble.¹²⁴

If, as Erin Striff claims, "The theatrical metaphor is a fundamental tool we use to understand culture," then the dramatic personalities populating the stage must themselves also represent a powerful mechanism to understand, at least in this instance, the gifted child in colonial society.¹²⁵ Quinn inspired not one, but two imitators: Helen Mackenzie, "the Young Tasmanian Prodigy" and "little countrywoman," as well as Master Drury, "a boy of singularly precocious dramatic instinct."¹²⁶ Additionally, it is possible to argue that the *Hobart Courier* on Tuesday, 10 April 1855 made one of the first references to a child "celebrity" in its description of Anna Maria Quinn's popularity.

If the many reviews detailing her effect on colonial communities are taken together with the critical response to her abilities and compared to the reception of more mature players of Shakespeare in the era, Anna Maria Quinn does emerge as a personality meriting much greater recognition as an important performer of Shakespeare in early Australian theater. Quinn was remarkable in her own

121. Kett, "Adolescence and Youth," 287.

122. Larisa V. Shavinina, "The Psychological Essence of the Child Prodigy Phenomenon: Sensitive Periods and Cognitive Experience," *Gifted Child Quarterly* 1 (1999): 25.

123. McDermott, "'This Isle is Full of Noise': American Players of Shakespeare in Australia, 1879-89," in *O Brave New World*, eds Golder and Madelaine, 88.

124. See Harold Love's discussion "'Sir, I am a tragedian': The male superstars of the Melbourne stage, 1850-70," in *ibid.*, 56-71.

125. Striff, ed., *Performance Studies*, 1.

126. See *Hobart Courier*, 21 September 1855, and *Hobart Mercury*, 18 September 1855.

right as a child “star” throughout the duration of her early career, and no other contemporary successfully rivalled her popularity or challenged her celebrity as the subject of such concentrated media scrutiny. Australian publications considered her a distinguished actress of the nineteenth century, regularly publishing details of her theatrical career, even twenty-five years after she first appeared.¹²⁷

In conclusion, the intensity of Anna Maria Quinn’s colonial media scrutiny provides important historical evidence by which to understand evolving theories of the childhood experience and the mid-nineteenth-century roots of a burgeoning scientific interest in child intelligence and consciousness in Australia.¹²⁸ The existence of such rich publicity suggests that colonial journalists grappled to conceive the psychological character of Quinn’s exceptional theatrical talents as expressed in the child prodigy’s “unique intellectual picture of the world.”¹²⁹ This reflects the uncertain crossroads at which the nascent study of the psychology of childhood stood in the middle of the nineteenth century. Different psychological schools of thought still very much contested the significance of exceptional children such as Anna Maria Quinn.

127. See the *Australian*, 14 November 1874, and the *Bulletin*, 22 October 1880.

128. *Hobart Courier*, 17 April 1855.

129. Larisa V. Shavinina, “Psychological Essence,” 25.