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Innocence, Experience, and Childhood Dramas: Charles Stratton and Lavinia Warren

In Stacy Carlson’s *Among the Wonderful*, a conversation takes place between three of the employees of P. T. Barnum’s American Museum. The ‘giantess’ Ana Swift, the ‘bearded lady’ Maud Kraike, and the resident pianist Thomas Willoughby are discussing their colleague, Charles Stratton, otherwise known as General Tom Thumb. Maud articulates her discomfort with Charles’s precociousness:

‘You know who is the strangest of them all? Who gives me chills every time I think about him? […] Tom Thumb.’

‘What?’ said Thomas. ‘He’s just a little boy!’

‘He’s terrifying,’ Maud declared. ‘Think about how young he is […] this will be the entire scope of his life, where he looks for all types of sustenance.’

‘Like Caligula in the Roman Army,’ Thomas murmured […]

‘But Ana, you’ve experienced normal life with your family. It’s in you somewhere. He won’t have that, ever’.

(Carlson, 2011, pp. 147–48)

There are several themes here which are significant in terms of both nineteenth-century and neo-Victorian representations of Stratton. His persona is based on a combination of worldliness and youth: first ‘discovered’ by Barnum aged just four years old, he was performing at the age of five, yet billed as being eleven to make his short stature even more remarkable. For Maud, this synthesis is disconcerting. In part, she perceives him to be something of a victim. His childhood has been interrupted, and she hints that this will lead to him being a damaged adult, constantly seeking the approval of his audience. However, she is not exactly sympathetic: this lack of ‘normality’ makes him a disturbing,
‘strange’ figure for those he encounters. Furthermore, although Thomas initially protests that Charles is ‘just a little boy!’, suggesting purity and unworldliness, his subsequent comparison of the boy to ‘Caligula’ is ominous. The name of this infamous Roman emperor has become a byword for despotism, insanity, and sexual deviance, and to associate the young Charles with this figure undermines any assumption of childhood innocence. ‘Little’ boys can grow into dangerous, ‘abnormal’, hyper-sexualised men.

Charles Stratton and Lavinia Warren were people of short stature; referred to as ‘dwarves’ during their lifetimes, they were promoted and managed by Barnum and toured the world in freak shows and exhibitions. Stratton was born in Connecticut, United States in 1838. Although of average size at birth and in infancy, he stopped growing as a young child and would remain at a height of just over 3ft. He was engaged as one of Barnum’s exhibits at the age of 4, and continued to work with him until his death in 1883. Billed as ‘General Tom Thumb’, Stratton’s act generated considerable wealth and fame for both him and Barnum and led to Stratton being introduced to American presidents and politicians, and notable royals and aristocrats in Europe. Warren was born in 1841 in Middleborough, Massachusetts. After leaving a career as a school teacher, she began her stage career performing on a Mississippi show boat before subsequently being managed by Barnum. She married Stratton in a high-profile ceremony, orchestrated by Barnum, in 1863. Her sister Minnie was also a woman of short stature whose career was managed by Barnum. Although the Strattons had no children, one of Barnum’s famed hoaxes involved exhibiting the couple with their ‘baby’ (it was later revealed that the Strattons were pictured with a succession of infants, who would be abruptly replaced once they grew too large) and then circulating reports of the child’s ‘death’ when the ruse became too strenuous to maintain. Minnie did, however, become pregnant by her husband, but both mother and child died in childbirth in 1878. After Stratton’s death, Lavinia married Count Primo Magri, an Italian man with restricted growth, and continued to work as a touring performer. She died in 1919.

As numerous commentators have identified, the nineteenth century can be located as a turning point in the historical construction of the notion of ‘childhood’. Through economic, legal and cultural shifts, children began to be associated with innocence, vulnerability, and being in need of protection from the adult world. But what of individuals who might be perceived as crossing the boundaries between the notion of the ‘adult’ and the ‘child’ due to their physical appearance and their