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Abstract


Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* heralded the popularity in Victorian England of a new type of novel, the novel of child development, that traced the experience of displaced child protagonists as they found their place in the world by working out their relationships with a series of parents and parent-figures. At the same time, the newly prominent field of English child custody law began to articulate why and how parentage matters for a developing child. An examination of one of the first highly publicized English custody disputes, *Wellesley v. Beaufort*, brings out some of the concerns about parentage at work in *Oliver Twist*, in a reading that assesses why stories of children and parents became prominent in the Victorian age, and why the novelistic versions of these stories so often intertwined attention to childhood experience with attention to legal themes.

*Oliver Twist* exhibits what would become the defining feature of the Victorian novel of child development: it uses the story of a displaced child to raise questions about the definition and function of parentage, and thus the validity of class distinctions, at what was seen as a time of social and political upheaval. Like many other instances of the genre, *Oliver Twist* maps these questions onto the terrain of law with a plot that explores the role of law in formulating parentage and therefore identity. While *Oliver Twist*, like many other Victorian novels, attempts to distinguish law from novelistic narrative as competing enterprises, it at the same time collapses those distinctions by suggesting how narrative and legal innovations could work together to negotiate this upheaval in a way that seemed to question, but ultimately preserved through transformation, the status quo.