

Childhood in Early Modern England, c. 1500-1700

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The story of the early modern child is essentially one of continuity. While it has been argued by some, most famously Philippe Ariès, that childhood underwent a profound transformation at the end of the Middle Ages, the evidence suggests that early modern children were ultimately quite similar to their medieval and classical predecessors. They too were viewed as vulnerable beings whose cognitive and spiritual “incompleteness” was more or less assumed. Indeed, as historian Steven Ozment once remarked, the early modern child was “a creature in search of humanity.” Far from belittling children, however, this not-quite-human status actually called attention to their distinctive powers and behaviors; occasionally it even gave them special symbolic standing within their communities. For the student of culture, this characterization of the child is worth considering in detail, since it has consequences for how we think about drama, religious life, and politics during the period. In what follows, we will track the “in-between” status of children with respect to three important themes: reason, the sacred, and play.

The Child and Reason

The limited cognitive capacity of children was a commonplace of early modern culture, which often referred to them as “simple” or “apish”—mere imitators of deliberate actions that adults took for specific reasons. Jean Calvin, for example, whose writings were so influential on English spirituality, glossed the famous passage from Matthew 18 on the value of “little children” by saying that this particular age “is distinguished by simplicity to such an extent, that [they] are unacquainted with the degrees of honor, and with all the incentives to pride.” As we will see below, there was a spiritual value to this kind of “simplicity,” but the idea that children were unaware of the practical or social value imposed on things by human reason was essentially a statement about their developmental incompleteness. In an early work of psychology by Thomas Wright entitled *The Passions of the Mind*, for example, the writer notes that children “lack the use of reason, and are guided by an internal imagination, following nothing else but that [which] pleases their senses, even after the same manner as brute beasts do.”

In addition to viewing children to animals, writers like Wright also compared them to unreasoning adults. What was particularly troubling about this state of imaginative absorption was that it offered little opportunity for interruption by grown-up concerns; it was essentially an immersion in “fancy” or imagination rather than the world of experience. To many, it seemed that children occupied something like a middle rung on the ladder of created beings: unlike their adult superiors, they lacked the originality which was thought to come from self-discipline and reflection. (Later the Romantics would reverse this idea, equating creativity with child-like spontaneity.) Shakespeare himself quotes one of these proverbs in *Richard III*, when Queen Elizabeth tells the Cardinal not to repeat sensitive information in front of the young princes because “pitchers have ears” (2.4.37). What she means is that children are receptacles for words: they gather up what

they hear and then repeat that information in inappropriate situations. The notion that children would simply repeat things without necessarily understanding them suggested a comparison with parrots, another famous “repeating” animal.

Such comparisons with objects, animals and other less-than-rational creatures were not always unflattering, as the following proverb illustrates: “Truth’s told by babes and fools.” While it was possible to think of children as lacking basic adult capacities for discretion, their lack of inhibition and natural spontaneity could also make their words more believable. If children lacked reason and, with it, the ability to censor their speech and actions out of respect for propriety, it was quite understandable that truth might come “from the mouths of babes,” to quote another biblical commonplace.

Shakespeare and his contemporaries seem to have believed this principle in the abstract, but they also recognized that children were capable of lying for their own (or their parents’) gain. King James himself became an expert at ferreting out the deceptions of children and adolescents who had pretended to be bewitched or possessed by demons. In early modern witchcraft inquiries, children were exemplary victims, playing out the script of demonic possession, which included heaving “fits,” uncontrollable crying, speaking in “hollow voices,” and “vomiting” pins. Such was the case with the Throckmorton children, whose fits and convulsions in the Huntingdonshire town of Warboys led to the execution of two witches who were thought to be plaguing them deliberately. These and other children served as powerful witnesses to the power of demonic action precisely because they were seen as somehow “lower down” on the hierarchy of deliberating creatures. To the extent that they were themselves “empty” of adult motives and reason, they could be filled with other powers that seemed to capture them from without.

The Child and the Sacred

When Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to a church door in Wittenberg, Germany in 1517, he set into motion the Reformation, a movement aimed at purifying the Roman Catholic church, which ultimately resulted in the establishment of Protestantism. The Reformation had a powerful impact on English culture, and so it is not surprising that children were involved in many of the religious reforms (and counter-reforms) that were instituted during this period. We cannot be sure whether the groundswell of religious publications in sixteenth-century England represented an organic, popular embrace of Protestantism, or simply the zealotry of theologians and clergymen. But many of the surviving texts suggest that children were considered a prime target for writers wishing to promote reformed ideas and religious practices.

A large number of catechisms, for example, were produced by reformers to try to include the youngest members of the population in the new faith. These catechisms were often meant to prepare children for eventual admission to communion, although there was significant anxiety about their taking the sacrament before they were fully cognizant of its meaning. We have examples, in fact, of catechisms designed for children as young as three years old, and in some instances doctrinal points were simply read out by adults to be answered with a yes or no by the child. The proliferation of question-answer exercises

designed specifically to teach children the rudiments of reformed doctrine attests to both the ambitions of reformers—who wanted to include the youngest generation in their reforms—and to their sense that children (along with illiterate or semi-literate adults) needed to receive instruction in a form that was specifically tailored to their educational level.

The ritual of baptism—where children were sprinkled with holy water in the presence of elder spiritual caretakers—was also affected by changing views on the power of church-sponsored sacraments. We know that baptism was widely practiced by English parents, whether or not they belonged to the new Protestant faith. The survival of special “chrism” cloths, which were wrapped around newly baptized children, gives us some sense of the importance of this ritual for those who engaged in it. Baptism represented a formal entry into the care of the church and, according to Catholic doctrine, provided certain spiritual benefits even if it did not decisively “save” a child from original sin. Protestants were anxious about the power that might be invested in such rituals, since for them it was important to emphasize the individual’s personal, conscientious assent to spiritual obligations—an assent that could not be fully given by an infant. Thus for Luther and other Reformation thinkers, baptism tended to be a symbol of one’s coming redemption rather than the actual transformation through an infusion of grace. Such debates call our attention to the importance of deliberate choice and willed (as opposed to unthinking) faith in the new religious consciousness gradually taking hold in England. To the degree that these spiritual acts were understood to take place within the deliberating soul of the individual, children represented an important “limit case” for thinking about just how responsible an individual might be for his or her salvation.

And yet, even if children could not entirely choose salvation, they had long been credited with a spiritual purity that made them seem close to God. By the end of the seventeenth century, the child was becoming a model for a new kind of piety that emphasized the “simplicity” of religious devotion. The English poet Thomas Traherne, for example, offered a powerful vision of innocence in his collection of religious poems, *Centuries*, while Quakers embraced an ethos of spontaneous, unmediated spiritual authenticity. Anticipating Wordsworth, Traherne associates infancy with “sublime and celestial greatness”:

Those pure and virgin apprehensions I had from the womb, and that divine light wherewith I was born are the best unto this day, wherein I can see the Universe....Certainly Adam in Paradise had not more sweet and curious apprehensions of the world, than I when I was a child. (Third Century, sec. 1)

Some of this preference for “simple” piety recalls the medieval stories of Catholic saints who did great works in their earliest years, but the tradition of seeing children as a model for *uncomplicated* spirituality and judgment seems different in emphasis. The qualities of simplicity and purity could mean different things to different religious groups. In some cases, this precocity and innocence could symbolize the future of the church, or the simplicity of adult spirituality when it was attuned to the basic truths of the gospel. When, for example, Puritans began writing their own spiritual autobiographies in the

seventeenth century, the writer would often show signs of spiritual awakening and conscience in childhood. Children were thus depicted as being able to grasp the essential warrants for redemption—experiencing, in effect, the type of conversion experience that was usually associated with adult spirituality. Such stories of spiritual precocity in children, or childish spirituality in adults, suggest that children were an integral part of Reformation religious life as both symbols of an ideal faith and future Christians to be cultivated from the earliest years.

The Child and Play

One of the religious festivals from the so-called “old religion” of Catholicism was the feast of the Boy Bishops, an event that began in December which involved children dressing up as Bishops of the church, offering sermons to their elders and parading around town in mock processions. Historians and anthropologists refer to this kind of festival as a ritual of “inversion,” one in which the usual authorities are demoted and those at the margins take center stage. Such events could provide an “escape valve” for building social tension, but they may also have served as an occasion for serious criticism of the church and its practices. We are not certain how “radical” this type of festival really was—whether it was just a holiday pastime or a real moment when authorities were called to account—but the fact that Catholics clung to the practice even when it was outlawed by Henry VIII and Edward VI (and revived in the interim by Mary) suggests that it was a popular event.

In one of these sermons preached in the Gloucester cathedral by the boy bishop John Stubs in 1558 (written by a church official), the boy lectures his elders on their childishness. “It is a wonder,” he says, “to see among you so many children in years, and so few innocents in manners.” At one point he picks out a young listener in the audience for praise, only to suggest the pitfalls of trusting innocent faces: “Look in his face and you would think that butter would not melt in his mouth; but smooth as he looks, I will not wish you to follow him if you know as much as I do.” Presumably the chorister (choir boy) who was delivering the sermon would have gotten a laugh on this line, since he himself possessed some of the very qualities of the angelic (but still naughty) boy he takes as his example.

The feast of the Boy Bishop illustrates an important aspect of children’s behavior that the historian can only grasp indirectly from the evidence: their capacity for fooling and play. This capacity must have been recognized and appreciated by the adults who in effect “licensed” the Boy Bishop to take office and create an amusing disruption during the feast days surrounding Christmas. Such play would have been the exception rather than the rule, however, since social historians tell us that most children were put to work in apprenticeships or given minor household tasks as soon as they were able to contribute to the family. Since the vast majority of English people made their living through manual labor or craft, there was comparatively less supervised “recreation” with children than there is today.

Well before children reached adolescence, in fact, girls may have been given in piece work around the house or boys given rudimentary tasks that may have led them to apprenticeships with one of the guilds. More socially privileged children would also have been introduced into the adult world comparatively early, as the practice of placing one's children in other wealthy households (to teach them their social role) was quite common. While historians have argued about whether early modern children were treated with more indulgence as the extended family shrank and families become more closely or "affectively" linked, it seems clear that play itself was clearly a respite from the adult world. That does not mean, however, that child's play was simply for children.

Indeed, adults were anxious to press children into a particularly lucrative kind of play in the children's theater companies that thrived around London during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The children's companies of St. Paul's and the Blackfriars Theater (an enclosed theater that Shakespeare's company would eventually commandeer) performed dramas for a paying audience in London. Actors in these companies were drawn from choir schools where they would have received training in Latin and singing; their work in the theater supplemented the funds set aside for their education and maintenance by their royal patrons. Some of the most distinguished dramatists in London wrote plays for the children's companies: Chapman, Marston, Middleton, Dekker, and most famously Ben Jonson.

Jonson's *Cynthia's Revels*, for example, features an opening induction in which the child actors argue over which one will be allowed to speak the Prologue. As the argument careens out of hand, one child who has been forbidden the part decides to ruin the author's plot by telling "all the argument of his play afore-hand." While the disaster is deliberate, the apparently spontaneous rebellion of the child player in this scene is meant to play on the audience's sense that children could quite often be unruly, and that such mischievousness was funny.

Later in the century children would begin to be associated with prophecy, particularly during the Interregnum when the world seemed, in Christopher Hill's memorable phrase, to have been "turned upside down." These children often prophesied the imminent return of the monarch—or more apocalyptically, of the King of Kings—to a populace that was already destabilized by the unprecedented execution of Charles I. Even in such exalted contexts, the notion that that the child was a creature of play may nevertheless have exerted a certain underlying power on those who witnessed and recorded such prophesies. Hearing a child speak about national politics or eschatology would have been arresting precisely because children were *not* associated with such serious topics. In the prophetic child, then, we have an example of the complex interaction of common "wisdom" about children and a specific situation in which those beliefs could be confirmed or inverted.

Child lore was a flexible body of ideas and associations that early modern writers and performers could dip into and modify as the situation demanded. While that lore may have been inaccurate—clearly all children were not parrots, prophets, or mischief-makers—it was nevertheless useful to have such a reservoir of stories and associations at

the ready. Without such ideas, the real actions of children would have been difficult if not impossible to interpret.

Suggested Readings

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