



LITERARY CULTURES AND CHILDHOODS

Literary Cultures and Medieval and Early Modern Childhoods

Edited by

Naomi J. Miller · Diane Purkiss

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Literary Cultures and Childhoods

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Scholarly interest in the literary figure of the child has grown exponentially over the last thirty years or so due, in part, to the increased attention given to children's literature within the academy and the development of the multidisciplinary field of Childhood Studies.

Given the crucial importance of children to biological, social, cultural and national reproduction, it is not surprising that child and adolescent characters may be found everywhere in Anglo-American literary expressions. Across time and in every literary genre written for adults as well as in the vast and complex array of children's literature, 'the child' has functioned as a polysemous and potent figure. From Harry Potter to Huck Finn, some of the most beloved, intriguing and enduring characters in literature are children.

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Naomi J. Miller • Diane Purkiss
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Literary Cultures and Medieval and Early Modern Childhoods

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*To our children—Fiona, Isaiah, Damaris and Elias Miller, and Alice and
Hermione Dowling—whose childhoods have been imbued with literary
cultures.*

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Naomi

Thanks go to my students at Smith College, who have inspired and challenged me through their own engagement with literary cultures and childhoods in classroom discussions of new and classic children's books that adapt medieval and early modern literary cultures for contemporary audiences. I'm also grateful also for the faculty grant support offered by Smith College, which enabled continuing research and professional development in many of the areas and issues explored by this volume, both in archives and at scholarly conferences.

Throughout the often challenging responsibilities that attend the compilation of a volume of essays as extensive and diverse in focus as this one, I benefited from the hard work and perseverance of the volume contributors, who responded to the numerous queries and suggestions of the co-editors with diligence and thoughtfulness. On the flip side of that exchange, I have appreciated the exceptional patience, good humor, and critical acumen of the Palgrave series editor, Lynne Vallone.

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Diane

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As always, none of this would have been possible without the help of Ivan Dowling.

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Naomi J. Miller’s scholarship includes *Changing the Subject: Mary Wroth and Figurations of Gender in Early Modern England* (UP of Kentucky, 1996), and two recent co-edited volumes of essays: *Re-Reading Mary Wroth* (with Katherine Larson) (Palgrave, 2015), and *Maternity and Romance Narratives in Early Modern England* (with Karen Bamford) (Ashgate, 2015). In the field of childhood studies, she has edited three volumes of essays: *Gender and Early Modern Constructions of Childhood* (with Naomi Yavneh) (Ashgate, 2011), *Sibling Relations in the Early Modern World* (with Naomi Yavneh) (Ashgate, 2006), and *Reimagining Shakespeare for Children and Young Adults* (Routledge, 2003), and has authored an essay on conjuring Shakespeare for young audiences in *The Shakespearean World* (Routledge, 2017). She is Professor of English and the Study of Women and Gender at Smith College.

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On the Inconstancy of Witches: Pierre de Lancre's Tableau de l'inconstance des mauvais anges et Demons (1612) (with Harriet Stone) (Arizona Center for Texts and Studies, 2006); *Consuming News: Newspapers and Print Culture in Early Modern Europe, 1450–1700* (with William Layher) (Rodopi, 2009). She also published essays on early modern topics such as magic, witchcraft, print culture and media, the body, and secrets. She is the Barbara Schaps Thomas and David M. Thomas Professor in the Humanities in Arts and Sciences, Vice Provost and Associate Vice Chancellor at Washington University in St. Louis.

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INTRODUCTION: READING CHILDHOOD THROUGH LITERATURE

Does childhood have a history? Eamon Duffy recently found it necessary to ask that question, commenting that not all that long ago, William Wordsworth wrote about childhood as if every childhood was identical in its passionate contact with the eternal and also with the natural (Duffy, 111). Very few historians and even fewer literary critics would accept this opinion now. Now, most of us understand that “the child” is as much an historical construct as the state, race, and sexuality. But as with race and sexuality, there are really two intertwining histories that we need to address simultaneously: first, the history of the experience of the child, and second, its inevitable dancing partner, the history of the concept of what a child is. The latter, like the conceptions of sexuality and race, is rarely disinterested. Instead, it is typically constructed by the child’s other, the child’s ruler, the child’s dominant world maker. When children’s literature critic Perry Nodelman speaks of childhood as a subaltern state, it is this violent hierarchy he has in mind (Nodelman, 34).

Following Gramsci, Homi Bhabha defines subalterns as “oppressed minority groups whose presence was crucial to the self-definition of the majority group” (Bhabha, 210). The child in the family, in the workplace, and in cultural work fits this definition. According to Nodelman, children are the last subalterns, the last example of a group occupying a cultural site always identifiable as subordinate to a culture not of their making, an identity which they play only a limited role in forging. Despite the fact that we know that there have always been children around, they are seldom included in our social models and fictions. Too often, children are a

subaltern group of prehistory, belonging to a moment before and therefore outside the history of adults.

Keith Thomas speaks of the child in medieval and early modern society as “muted” (Thomas, 47). Our goal is to turn up the volume. Building on recent, crucial work in thinking of children across a wide range of disciplines, from cultural anthropology and folklore to performance studies and the history of science, as well as historical and geographical locations from Anglo-Saxon burial sites to colonial America, this volume engages writers who are responsible for bringing the new field of childhood studies into being.

Ironically, one of the most “adult” constructions of childhood is the one that most strenuously pretends to represent itself as a radical truth: the Romantic child, innocent of the burdens of adulthood, able to enjoy and appreciate nature as an extension of itself, often unconsciously and unstudiedly pious, mistaken for an angel, invariably rural, mostly unlettered. This child has never had very much to do with the way real children experience childhood. Instead, it is all too plainly an external, post-hoc construction of childhood as an imaginative refuge for adults, almost a paracosm alongside the much less comfortable real world which adults rule. One of the very great advantages of this collection is that the medieval and early modern periods its essays consider begins well before the advent of this particular form of adult fantasy. Therefore one of the questions it asks is: what kinds of fantasies gathered around the figure of the child *before* Rousseau and Wordsworth? What kinds of interests managed the idea of childhood before industrialisation and urbanisation made it natural to imagine the child as outside the terrifying and grinding demands of those very adult spaces?

Our first question must be this: where do we *find* the child? Where do we even begin to look? We need to deepen and complicate the very idea of “the child.” Central to these essays is the task of ingeniously probing different kinds of written sources which turn out, on attentive examination, to have the faint image of a child hidden in the corner, or the shape of a child peeping out from under a table.

The essays assembled here explore a very wide range of topics in their collective and coordinated efforts to locate the marginalized figure of the child in earlier cultures. Where, exactly, is the child made? The opening group of essays take as their starting point education—perhaps the most powerful social engine for the shaping of the child—in its historically various forms. The essays in this section, *Educating Children*, resist a simple

equation between the ideology of the system and the child. Humanism, monasticism, Calvinism and home intersect and conflict with one another. Childhood is often the place on which the battles between ideologies are enacted. Each method of education creates both a new way of managing the child and a new form of agency in the child. And as the child learns to read, he or she becomes both the agent and the subject of further adult reshapings.

Philippe Ariès, in *Centuries of Childhood*, argued that the nuclear family—invented, he proposed, in the seventeenth century, and bringing with it a sentimental idea of domesticity—acted more firmly to oppress the child than previous structures in which the child had previously been seen rather as a fragile and incompetent adult (Ariès). Certainly, the rise of print and Protestant interest in literacy saw a far greater emphasis on education in the home for all children. Education could be either formal or informal, a matter of family prayers, or of elaborate instruction in literacy or crafts and trades. Such education was inflected by class and social status, as well as, transparently, by gender, so that a boy might be the recipient of a toxic mix of Latin and beatings, while a girl might miss the beatings but also the Latin, in favor of either a modern language or domestic instruction.

Such children were also built from books, to adopt Francis Spufford's magical image, as the essays in this collection show (Spufford). We draw back, however, from suggesting that such books affected children directly; rather, all the essays here are interested in the conversation between the living child and the constructions of that child. Depending on the evidence examined, the authors come to a variety of conclusions, illustrating the complexity of the topic and showing that we cannot simply read the medieval or early modern child directly off books created to educate that child. Rather, such books are one factor among many in establishing the contested identity of the child in time.

The authors in this volume both interrogate and emphasize the idea of childhood at the time of cultural installation. What if the culture installed was alien? What if it was hated? What if the child simply differed problematically from its parents and their values, a difference that most often arose precisely because of education, classically in the case of the grammar school or choir school in which the child was inducted into what amounted to a different social class than its class of origin? When Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare went to grammar school, both became literally unable to share their experiences with their parents because they now occupied a class space to which Latin provided a vital entrance requirement.

What has been termed the enterprise culture of the medieval town and the early modern city could open up chasms between parents and children.

Another theme is children at work, for the idea of childhood as a space without work was not always part of earlier conceptions. In *Performing Childhood*, the second group of essays, the actor and the servant feature as points of contact, analysis, and fantasy for adults and children, meeting-points between worlds. Such meetings often meant that the threads of thinking pulled at the child's shape; the period's interest in mind and its workings, for example, could make a frame for the child's imagination. Such topics raise the acute question of the agential child. The essays in this group address the paradox that adults want children to be both independent and subordinate, spontaneous and obedient. For that reason, we are also collectively interested in play, and particularly in play as an initial site of social imitation and learning—ideological indoctrination, even—and also of creativity, resistance, and agency.

The idea of the paracosm as literally a world built by children for children is both a vital site for the formation of the child's imagination and an exciting space in which the norms of a culture can become visible enough to contest. In thinking about the paracosm, and about play, we are also thinking about the child in terms of space, in terms of space within the household, and in terms of occupying spaces dedicated to the child or spaces that remain firmly adult, and the movement between the two. Such movements—from adult to child, and from child to adult, particularly within subversively creative spaces offered by the theatre—are often defining. Studies that deal with children's appearance in very adult spaces, perhaps most notably in courtrooms, often investigate the way in which the child in such a space becomes a deeply problematic and anxiety-provoking representation of the whole of a culture. Typically, such children are already performing an act of resistance by standing as witnesses or complainants. Whether in courtrooms or on the stage, the act as well as the content of children's speech demonstrates the capacity to be explosive of ideals—for example, of the relation between mother and child. In some cases, the play world of the child and its acting out of stories of children told to it by adults can come troublingly to disturb the very ideas of childhood dear to the culture.

Psychological studies have shown that when asked to reminisce about their lives, virtually everybody focuses on the years between their early teens and mid-twenties, the years when a partner and a career are chosen. However, many writers of children's books instead focus on childhood

memories, including memories that are not made up of direct personal sensory experiences, but rather of remembered reading: remembering the act and experience of reading, remembering the story and the words as well. This necessarily casts a fascinating light on how far childhood is always a cultural construction, produced by evolving cultures of literacy, or “literary cultures,” across time. And if it is a cultural construction, and a subaltern state, then we should not be surprised to find that it is a contested construction, that writers of books about childhood are from the earliest times deliberately intervening and choosing how to represent and thus control the child.

The third group of essays, *Literatures of Childhood*, consider how agency is figured in a variety of contexts that reveal alternative conceptions of the relation between children and parents and that address the notion of play, outside the restrictions of adult identity. Written texts from the thirteenth through seventeenth centuries suggest a variety of engagements with literary culture experienced by girls and boys learning to negotiate their places in a social world informed differentially by race and nation as well as gender. Literatures of childhood also attest to epistemological debates about the differential status of the imagination, mind and learning in children and young people by contrast to adults. Moreover, children’s literary culture bears witness to a range of instructional, educational, and recreational reading that engaged the interests of young people. In exploring literature for children, the child is made visible through new and often neglected prisms. As well, the essays consider how notions of gender identity and class distinctions inform possibilities for agency in childhood.

In the periods embraced by this volume, death in childhood was common. Expressions of grief at the loss of a child offer us a window into conceptions of the child and its emotional value to the family. Exploring those dark places of the heart in *Legacies of Childhood*, the fourth group of essays take us to the brink of grasping both universality and the sharpest edges of historical difference. For parents, racked by losses and tormented by the dread of them, stories of the changeling child, of the orphan and the foundling, had special resonance, as they did too for children themselves when reprised as cautionary tales.

Religion also provided a series of uncomfortable and in some respects grossly inadequate coping mechanisms to adults trying to manage the grief of child death. Both as a conceptual system and as a series of moral codes and discourses, religion dominated all conceptions of the human

and hence all conceptions of children, while also offering a range of ways to distinguish between child and adult. Religion offered not only a framework for the child, but also and critically a framework for parenting, via the recurring motif of its stories of ideal or, conversely, dysfunctional families.

One of the ways in which childhood was envisaged was as the destination of missionary and conversion activities. Precisely because children were understood as malleable and plastic, it was possible to understand them as having been formed not solely by the educational pressures exerted by their Christian parents and society, but by the far greater and more terrifying powers of hell itself. Yet religion also offered ways in which the child agent could sometimes reverse or even upend the power structures that normally held it in check.

Christianity is a rich source of materials about the figure of the child. The themes of idealized child, lost child, and dead child coalesce in the figure of the ultimate child, Jesus Christ. Not only is there the particular devotion to the child Jesus, the child Mary, and child saints, especially child martyrs, but we can also see the idea of the child as subversively close both to the innocents evoked in the New Testament and to an unreconstructed and unbaptised lump of worldliness on which organised religion must act feverishly in order for it to be redeemed. Everywhere on the figure of the medieval and early modern child are the traces of a religion which took a child as its god, a child whose appearance *as* a child was both an impetus to love and a sign of the most extreme renunciation of power.

Not only the real, material child, but the fantasy of the child is a subject here: fantasies about children and fantasies told to and shared with children. The final group of essays, *Fictionalizing Literary Cultures for Children*, serves as a coda to the volume. Here, scholars and authors of children's and adult fiction explore varied instances when modern literary culture bridges historical notions of the child, from reimaginings of ancient legends, to contemporary adaptations of medieval and early modern texts, to picture-book versions of fairytales. Viewing childhood as a matchless space for imagination and creativity, and acknowledging that they themselves were children built from books, practicing creative writers illuminate conjunctions between the inner and outer child, between adults and their child selves, between material and imagined childhoods.

PART I: EDUCATING CHILDREN

In “Adult Ideologies in Late-Medieval Advisory Writing,” Anna Caughey considers the possibility of aristocratic boys and young men as a readership group in the fifteenth century through two late medieval “chivalry handbooks,” Gilbert Hay’s *The Buke of the Ordre of Knychthede* (1456), and William Caxton’s *The Book of the Ordre of Chyualry* (1484). Caughey argues that chivalry handbooks served as a means of guiding and controlling the behaviour of boys and young men while also building their desire to participate in chivalric activity. This was accomplished by promoting the desirability of knighthood as a social status that depended upon setting up adult men as the keepers of knowledge and prestige.

Children donated to monasteries by their parents in tenth- and eleventh-century England required not just education, but socialization to their monastic identities. In “Learning to Talk: Colloquies and the Formation of Childhood Monastic Identity in Late Anglo-Saxon England,” Rebecca King Cerling explores the monastic use of colloquies, or conversational dialogues, which taught the boys Latin, but also helped them to understand how to speak and act like monks. In order to illuminate a young child’s transition from home to monastery, the essay examines two colloquies used in Benedictine monasteries to teach young oblates who they were as monks, and traces the structure of the colloquies, which opened with quotidian concerns and then moved the students toward the practice of monastic patterns of speech, including restraint and blessing.

Gerhild Scholz Williams reviews texts about children or very young adolescents who are being led to the witches’ sabbath by adults, usually their mothers or aunts, to be offered to Satan. In “Children Bewitched—Children Possessed,” we also meet a child who changes into a werewolf, terrifying the neighbors. Sensational news about children accused of and instructed in black magic appears in chapbooks, demonologies, and pamphlets all across early modern Europe, telling of a community fearful and suspicious of the outsider, the witch, the shapeshifter. The texts under discussion here argue that the Devil relentlessly pursues the young in his efforts to seduce and destroy them. Perhaps less intentionally, these texts also demonstrate that he thrives on despair, sadness, poverty, and abuse.

While Tudor education was perceived to be strenuous and harsh, some schools included Aesop’s stories of talking animals and Ovid’s tales of magical transformation in the curriculum. In “The Tudor Schoolroom, Antique Fables, and Fairy Toys,” Catherine Belsey argues that Tudor

children were offered access to rich fantasy worlds, both in the course of the school day and at home in the evenings. Her essay examines the range of cultural resources available to early modern children, from popular romances to fireside tales, and considers the differential experiences of girls and boys.

In 1700, Cotton Mather produced a collection of short biographies of American children for adult and child readers alike where, after chronicling their commendable existences, the narratives culminate in an adulatory rendering of each child's death. Ivy Linton Stabell's "Valuing New England Childhood through the Joyful Deaths of Cotton Mather's *A Token for the Children of New England*" examines how Mather's emphasis on the ways survivors responded to these children's actions, words, and ends, and his declaration that his readers will "profit" by reading their stories, characterized children as significant figures in the colonial community. Stabell argues that Mather's inclusion of the lives of pious young New Englanders initiated the now commonplace practice of delivering narratives about American children to American children.

PART II: PERFORMING CHILDHOOD

Focusing on the "Magi" and "Innocents" plays from the *Chester Mystery Cycle*, Rose Alice Sawyer considers the insults directed at children by Herod and his soldiers in these performances, and argues that the use of derogatory language which draws upon the discourse surrounding changelings and child substitution constructs the bodies of the infant Christ and the Innocents as suitable sites of violence. "Changeling Stories: The Child Substitution Motif in the *Chester Mystery Cycle*" addresses the particular impact that changeling insults had when used against the figure of a child, while also drawing attention to the way in which medieval concerns about cuckoldry, the paternal bond, and infant malleability could be expressed through the story of the Nativity. By interrogating the references to changelings, perhaps the ultimate "problem children," Sawyer demonstrates that child substitution was a potent site upon which negative constructions of childhood could be built.

In "Inducting Childhood: The Scripted Spontaneity of Self-Referential Child Players," Bethany Packard surveys the inductions that often introduced performances by children's companies in early modern England. Inductions interwove the fictional character and the performer through their combination of "scripted improvisation" and self-referential