



The Child in British Literature

Literary Constructions of Childhood,
Medieval to Contemporary

Edited by Adrienne E. Gavin

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*To my children
L, D, and R,
to my parents Irene and John,
and, always, to
Dewayne*

Notes on Contributors

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1

The Child in British Literature: An Introduction

Adrienne E. Gavin

In various periods, including the present, childhood becomes a matter of particular cultural concern. One decade into the twenty-first century, childhood in Britain is a subject of media, welfare, marketing, educational, political, legal, parental, sociological, cultural, popular, and literary interest. There is concern that children are, on the one hand, victims who need greater protection from abuse and neglect and, on the other hand, semi-feral victimizers who make the streets unsafe for adults and signal society's disintegration. It is asked whether childhood has disappeared or been irreparably eroded or whether, instead, it is excessively evident, fetishized, and over-fretfully protected. Are contemporary children uncontrollably threatening, commercialized, sexualized? Are they unhealthily static, surveilled, and stressed? Or are they over-infantilized and enjoying a safer, happier, longer childhood with more opportunities than former generations could ever have imagined? The prevalence of such questions and the debates they provoke demonstrate the acute consideration being given to childhood, both generally and, through the rapid growth of childhood studies across a range of disciplines, academically.

This volume contributes to the current reassessment of childhood by exploring constructions of the pre-adolescent child in British literature from 1200 to 2010. Written by child-in-literature experts drawn from the UK, the USA, Europe, Canada, and Australia, the 15 essays in this collection consider the child in both children's literature and adult texts in genres including poetry, drama, and fiction. Focusing on the cultural and historical positioning of fictional childhood, the volume reads literary works as distinctively of their time and place and arranges essays chronologically in order to trace the passage of the child through British writing from the medieval period to the present.

Childhood is a state all adults have experienced, knowable as far as memory extends but strangely unknowable too. One of the ultimate life mysteries, it is ‘“a form of Otherness, possibly its archetypal form”’ (Morris 9). Childhood’s familiarity, yet unknowability, is one reason why it is so intriguing to writers, but is also why, as critics including Jacqueline Rose and Susan Honeyman have noted, there is an ‘impossibility’ in writing the child. ‘Childhood is whatever adults have lost and maybe never had,’ Honeyman notes. ‘How can any adult writer convincingly present such an inconsistent and imaginary position with any sense of authority?’ (4). Yet, in part because as Libby Brooks claims, ‘the most potent story we ever tell is the story of childhood’ (2), authors repeatedly return to the child as subject. They create authenticity, as children’s writer Philippa Pearce observes, not through alleging reality but through literary art:

The most intense experiences of childhood can be, in more than one sense, unspeakable, certainly far beyond anything a child’s vocabulary of words and ideas is capable of, either for understanding or expression So novelists are sometimes driven literally to take the words out of the mouths of their child characters, in order to replace them with something less realistic but much more deeply expressive (52).

Debate continues about levels of constructedness of the ‘real’ child as examined by historians, sociologists, psychologists, and educationists, but there is no doubt about the constructedness of literary children. However much inspired by real-life originals or contemporary thought, the child of literature is inarguably a construction of art. Created from authors’ autobiographical or biographical imperatives, social intent, historical inspiration, or literary imaginations, the fictional child is an artefact that expresses memories or intuitive understanding of childhood or symbolically pictures the child as innocent, victim, blank slate, born sinner, infant tyrant, visionary, or signifier of nostalgia, hope, despair, or loss. Literary children often carry substantial weight in texts, and, in envisioning the child, writers have constructed images and characters that serve various functions: instruction, allegory, pathos, escapism, satire, identification, demonization, or idealization. Childhood sometimes reflects a desire to return to a world without responsibility, of freedom and unsullied imagination where magic lies behind the coal scuttle or in the nursery walls. At other times it represents a state thankfully escaped from, for, as Pearce writes, ‘there is very much unpleasantness in childhood that we adults forget – and much that some

simply dare not remember. For, let's face it, a good deal of childhood is strong stuff for adults and totally unsuitable for children' (51–52).

Acknowledging the dislocation between literary representation and life, this volume is not primarily concerned with lived childhood in particular periods of British history. Instead, it examines children and childhood as constructed in literary texts and offers readings as to their significance. Yet literature does not stand entirely apart from life, and literary depictions of children are not only influenced by views on childhood in their times – for example, by thinkers such as John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, or Sigmund Freud – but also reflect and reveal concerns, cultural tendencies, and areas of interest in the period of their composition. At the same time, literary portrayals of childhood, sometimes intentionally, influence life. Charles Dickens's fictional children, for example, raised readers' consciousness about the nation's neglect and mistreatment of its youngest members, while the child of Romantic poetry continues to influence cultural conceptions of lived childhood today.

Highlighting prominent trends in literary constructions of childhood within chronological periods, the essays in this volume show that in a range of ways, and with varying emphases, childhood has been a vibrant element in British writing for over 800 years. It is important to acknowledge, however, that as literature has proliferated and found influences in ever wider literary, cultural, and social spheres, multiple and often contradictory discourses of childhood do exist simultaneously. This collection does not claim that each new – or seemingly new – construction of childhood neatly and irrevocably replaces its predecessor. Rather, it seeks to identify significant, historically contextualized, tendencies in portraying the child in order to trace broad shifts in childhood's journey through British literature.

Indicating common spectrums of childhood, critics often categorize constructions of the child as 'innately bad' or 'innately innocent.' Honeyman highlights a distinction between developmentalist views which see childhood as moving in stages towards an ideal of adulthood, with 'childhood [a]s irrational, in the worst cases primitive, and in need of taming,' and the Romantic idea of the child in which adulthood is seen as a fall from the 'intuitive, natural, and untainted by civilization' state of childhood (80). Chris Jenks identifies the 'Dionysian child' and 'Apollonian child,' with the Dionysian child representing an older image of childhood which 'rests on the assumption of an initial evil or corruption within the child' from which the child must be curbed and broken (62). The more modern 'Apollonian child' Jenks defines as 'angelic, innocent and untainted by the world' with 'a natural goodness and a clarity of vision that we might "idolize" or even "worship" as

the source of all that is best in human nature' (64–65). Peter Coveney's vision of childhood in modern literature situates at one pole representations of the child who is better off dead and at the other pole the child as symbol of growth and life and future (342), while Reinhard Kuhn's classifications of childhood include the 'Enigmatic child' and the 'Redemptive child.'

Presenting fresh interpretations rather than new taxonomies of childhood, many of the essays in this volume, nevertheless, challenge earlier views of literary children. Daniel T. Kline, for example, redresses the influence upon literary scholars of Philippe Ariès's claims that in 'medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist' (Ariès 128). Katie Knowles contests the idea that Shakespeare's child characters are homogeneous, pathetic characters that indicate a patch of dramatic failure on Shakespeare's part, while Edel Lamb rejects the common view that pre-eighteenth-century literature for children was purely instructional and therefore not part of the genealogy of children's literature 'proper.' Andrew O'Malley revisits Coveney's claim that until 'the last decades of the eighteenth century the child did not exist as an important and continuous theme in English Literature' (Coveney 29), while Adrienne E. Gavin and Andrew F. Humphries challenge assumptions that Edwardian writers simply continued Victorian portrayals of children.

Examining childhood in medieval and early modern texts from 1200 to 1700, the essays in Part I of this volume help rectify the unwarranted critical neglect of literary childhood in these periods and show that such previous discussion as does exist can in several respects be questioned. Demonstrating childhood's widespread textual presence, they identify child characters as portrayed predominantly in connection with religion and a sense of their sinfulness, with training and instruction towards adulthood, with the child's present or future commodity value (stratified by gender and class), and as victims of actual or threatened adult violence and brutality. 'Ages of Man' divisions of medieval and early modern thought, particularly ages of childhood – *infantia* (up to age 7), *pueritia* (7–14), and *adolescentia* (14 and above) – are also important in the periods' literary constructions of childhood. Being raised in clear stages towards adulthood and/or a Christian afterlife, children in these texts are revealed not simply as 'little adults' but as beings with their own roles, tastes, and thematic resonances.

Precedential in examining the history of childhood, Philippe Ariès's *Centuries of Childhood* (1960; English translation 1962) argued that the medieval period's high infant mortality meant that parents did not

bond closely with children and that childhood as a concept distinct from adulthood did not exist in medieval society, only emerging in the seventeenth century. While Ariès's views have been widely challenged by historians, as Daniel T. Kline in the volume's opening essay "That child may doon to fadres reverence" observes, literary scholars have been slower to move beyond such ideas and have not widely addressed the common presence of childhood in medieval texts. Childhood is significant, Kline shows, in such Middle English works as *Pearl* (c. 1375–1400), a dream vision in which a dead infant girl enlightens the poem's dreamer on the importance and standing of childhood in the afterlife. Children are present too, Kline reveals, in the religiously didactic educational texts used in schools, which are also traceable in adult works such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (c. 1400–25), indicating a thematic referencing of childhood. Saints, Jesus, and the Virgin Mary were frequently portrayed as children in the Middle Ages, serving as exemplary figures in works such as the English mystery plays and apocryphal infancy gospels. Works including 'How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter' (c. 1425) give guidance on how a girl should grow up into a marriageable young woman. Conduct or courtesy books for children serving at court were also produced, with elements of these seen in romances such as *Havelok the Dane* (c. 1290) which features, too, the common figure of a threatened child. Revealing that Middle English texts portray children as visible and significant in medieval society, Kline shows, too, that the figure of the threatened and endangered literary child does not indicate that medieval children were not valued but instead raises ethical questions about the organization of a just society.

In both medieval and early modern literature children are frequently subjected to threats and acts of violence. In ways similar to those Victorian literature would later employ, the child victim sometimes provokes social thought and adult action within, and implicitly outside, texts. Katie Knowles in 'Shakespeare's "terrible infants?"' argues against perceptions of Shakespeare's child characters as odd, unsettling, and weakly drawn, demonstrating that the murders of noble or royal boy characters in the tragi-histories *Richard III* (c. 1592–94), *King John* (c. 1595–97), and *Macbeth* (c. 1606) not only reveal the importance of dynasty and inheritance in early modern England but also serve as dramatic turning points which catalyse adult revenge against tyrant kings.

The early modern period also displayed interest in children as writers and actors, as Lucy Munro discusses in 'Infant Poets and Child Players,' and professional child acting companies were established, including the

Children of the Revels in 1629. Early modern children were exhorted to be obedient and silent, therefore child poets and dramatists were, by definition, potentially socially disruptive. Yet as Munro shows, early modern child writers such as Abraham Cowley (1618–67), Lady Rachel Fane (1613–80), and Thomas Jordan (c. 1617–85) were comparatively uninterested in depicting child characters or child-orientated concerns; instead, when they did construct the child, they followed adult narrative models and pictured children as compliant, passive, and dependent on adult protection and authority.

Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century advances in printing expanded possibilities for early modern children's literature as Edel Lamb outlines in 'Children read for their Pleasantness.' Publications produced for children included religious texts and catechisms; ABCs, hornbooks, primers, and readers; editions of fables, satires, and histories; conduct manuals; and anthologies, treasuries, and miscellanies of puzzles, riddles, proverbs, songs, amusing stories, anecdotes, and poems. Such works were used to educate children – often encouraging development from unbridled emotion to adult logic and control – yet as Lamb shows, they were not the purely instructional texts so often assumed. Works such as John Brinsley's translation of Evaldus Gallus's *Pueriles Confabulationum*, or, *Children's Dialogues, Little Conferences, or Talkings Together, or Little Speeches Together, or Dialogues Fit for Children* (1617) ravelled entertainment with instruction, making them a legitimate part of the history of what we now consider children's literature. In the same period, acute Puritan anxiety about the state of children's souls produced hell-fire and damnation texts such as James Janeway's *A Token for Children: Being an Exact Account of the Conversion, Holy and Exemplary Lives, and Joyful Deaths of Several Young Children* (1672).

Tracing literary childhood from 1700 to 1900, the essays in Part II examine texts from the eighteenth-century, Romantic, and Victorian periods. Discussing the influence on eighteenth-century literature of John Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's reactive *Émile, or On Education* (1762), Part II also addresses the flourishing of the innocent, natural, divine child in Romantic poetry, and the portrayal of humanized yet victimized children in Victorian fiction.

The importance of developing and instructing children towards adulthood was enshrined in Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. His central ideas were that children were not marked by original sin, that the infant's mind was a *tabula rasa* or blank slate, and that children learned through experience and should be moulded by parents from an early