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# I

DANIEL T. KLINE

## Female childhoods

Medieval persons showed nuanced awareness of human lifespan development. The familiar ‘ages of man’ texts generally followed one of three conceptual systems: the biologists’ theory of three ages (youth, maturity, and old age); the physiologists’ theory of four ages (childhood, youth, maturity, and old age), corresponding to the four humours, seasons, and elements; and the astrologers’ theory of seven ages (infancy, childhood, adolescence, youth, maturity, old age, decrepitude) following the Ptolemaic structure of the universe.<sup>1</sup> By the later Middle Ages a stable set of terms divided childhood into seven-year segments: *infantia* (infancy), *pueritia* (childhood), and *adolescentia* (adolescence). These demarcations were based primarily upon age but also considered the social, emotional, and mental development of the individual. Prior to the age of seven or *infantia*, an infant girl was not considered to be a fully rational and responsible agent. The transition to *pueritia* was marked by growing personal awareness and social accountability, and the move into *adolescentia* was marked by the onset of menarche and secondary sexual characteristics. At *adolescentia*, regarded as twelve for girls and fourteen for boys, young people could marry according to canon law or could break a marriage contract arranged in their childhood by paying a fine equivalent to the value of the marriage.<sup>2</sup> Although remaining unmarried was a possibility, the life options available to most girls were limited to marriage, religious vocation, or some form of domestic employment or household management. The social ideal, of course, was for young medieval girls to marry and have children, for the normative course of secular life led a girl directly from her father’s house as a child and daughter to her husband’s house as a wife and mother.

### *Infantia*: conception and parturition

In concert with the relatively limited life options available to maturing young women, a female infant in the Middle Ages faced gendered assumptions even

prior to birth. Medieval medical tradition, derived from Aristotle, viewed the creation of a female child as the unsuccessful attempt to generate a male. One important medieval treatise calls a girl

*puella*, as it were clene and pure as þe blake of þe y3e, as seiþ Isidre. For among all þat is iloued [beloved] in a wench chastite and clenness is iloued most. Men schal take hede of wenches for þey bene hote and moist of complexioun; and tender, small, pliaunt, and faire of disposicioun of body; shame fast, fereful, and mury, touching þe affecciou; delicat in clothinge. For as Senec seiþ, semelich [modest] cloþinge bysemep hem wel þat beþ chast wenchis.<sup>3</sup>

The references to learned authorities here legitimate the discursive construction of the nascent girl; the description of her physiognomic and humoral characteristics quickly lapses into an evaluation of the girl's fragility, as opposed to the boy, who is 'clepid *puer* when he is iwanied [weaned] from melk and departed from þe brest and þe tete, and knowep good and euel. þefore he is able to fonge [undertake] chastisinge and lore [learning], and þanne hi is iput and sette to lore vnder tutours'.<sup>4</sup> While young boys are defined according to their separation from feminine nurture and are prepared for schooling and the lifelong discipline of hard work, girls are defined by their sexuality, held to be emotionally labile, and marked by suitable clothing. Children, especially girls, were often seen as fully fledged subjects from the perspective of what they would become as adults, rather than as subjects in their own right.<sup>5</sup>

### *Infantia*: birth and baptism

Birth was the province of women: as in the Nativity play of the N-Town cycle (to be performed in aNy-Town),<sup>6</sup> medieval women gave birth in the presence of female friends and relations under the care of a midwife, who was empowered to baptize critically ill newborns in extreme emergencies.<sup>7</sup> Baptism itself served a number of important long- and short-term social functions for the newly born girl. The infant daughter was given her Christian name and ushered into the religious community while surrounded by her family, godparents and extended kin, and family friends. Parents provided for the young girl's physical needs, while the godparents taught the basic tenets of the Church ('Here [their] pater noster and here crede'),<sup>8</sup> and both were enjoined to protect the youngster from accidents like drowning, burning, trampling, and smothering.<sup>9</sup> Since godparents often later served as guardians, parents might choose godparents of a higher social status who could serve as the girl's advocate or employer in adolescence.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, young girls did not earn income as did boys prior to their majority; therefore,

raising a daughter and marrying her off meant that her family lost money, often in the form of a dowry, while a son's labour and eventual marriage brought wealth into the household.

The medieval double vision regarding female children – their coincident social disapprobation and ideological elevation – and the social and theological necessity of infant baptism is depicted most potently in the elegiac dream vision *Pearl*. An apology for the innocence of young children that subverts conventional medieval hierarchies, the poem features a dead infant girl who summons a 'theology of childhood' in educating the adult narrator, even though she knows 'nawþer Pater ne Crede' (line 485).<sup>11</sup> The *Pearl*-child's 'theology of childhood' is refracted through the 'materiality of childhood' in a veiled account of her birth, brief life, death, and burial. Swathed in the scent of rose-water at birth and wearing the pearl-encrusted crysom of infant baptism, the *Pearl*-child is a 'faunt', a young child who was nearer to the Dreamer than aunt or niece (line 233), whose relationships extended to godparents and even the wider parish community, and who died before she could learn the rudiments of Christian faith. The *Pearl*-child's argument is that she should be valued for who she is, an infant girl, and not just for what she might become – a paramour, an object of sexual desire, a bride. Bolstered by biblical texts from Matthew to Revelation, the *Pearl*-child admonishes the Dreamer to internalize permanently the cultural inversion indicated by Jesus' saying, 'The last shall be first and the first last.' By extension, a culture that devalues the young girls stands equally rebuked: as Jesus tells the disciples, 'Hys ryche no wy3 my3t wynne / Bot he com þyder ryzt as a chyld' (lines 722–3).<sup>12</sup>

### *Pueritia: education and training*

Infant girls were ushered into the social world through rituals surrounding birth and baptism. In contrast to the *Pearl*-child, who does not attain the rudiments of Christian teaching, the young Virgin Mary is often depicted as the obedient daughter and perfect student, as in the N-Town *Mary Play*, a previously self-contained play now incorporated into the N-Town cycle.<sup>13</sup> Mary's obedience to her parents and to God is an object lesson for the young, while her parents' devotion to her and to the Church is a paradigm for adult emulation. Mary's exemplary life itself becomes the basis for two prayers, the 'ave' and 'Our Lady's Psalter' (which includes the pater noster, or 'Lord's Prayer'). These prayers not only formed the basis of medieval piety, they also provided the educational foundation of medieval youth. One late fourteenth-century school primer begins with a symbol of the cross (✠), which signalled the student to cross herself with the saying, 'Christ's cross me speed'. This is

then followed by an ABC, a denunciation of the devil, the paternoster, the ave Maria, the Apostle's Creed, the Ten Commandments, the seven deadly sins, the seven principal virtues, the seven works of bodily mercy, the seven works of spiritual mercy, the five bodily wits, the four cardinal virtues, the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, 1 Corinthians 13, the Beatitudes, and the Sayings of St Augustine.<sup>14</sup>

Medieval education focused primarily upon training boys in basic literacy for ecclesiastical and professional duties; girls had access to more informal instruction. Young boys might attend a grammar school (to train in Latin) or a song school, as do the 'litel clergeon' and his older 'felawe' in Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale* (7.495–536),<sup>15</sup> before moving on to higher studies. Girls might receive instruction at a local nunnery; from a nurse, chaplain, clerk, or priest; or from local charitable institutions. By the late fourteenth century, guilds or other fraternities began to sponsor local schools.<sup>16</sup> Nunneries appear to have regularly instructed their novices, and about two thirds of English nunneries intermittently took young children of both sexes as boarders, despite ecclesiastical prohibitions.<sup>17</sup> In *The Reeve's Tale*, Symkin's wife

. . . thoughte that a lady sholde hire spare                    [be aloof]  
 What for hire kynrede and hir nortelrie                    [nurtured; education]  
 That she hadde learned in the nonnerie.  
 (1.3966–8)

Young gentlewomen probably learned enough Latin to read their psalters or books of hours, but more likely received sufficient instruction in the vernacular (French and, into the fourteenth century, English) to run a household, read popular or religious literature, manage business affairs, and conduct themselves well in polite company.<sup>18</sup> Widely copied over several centuries, Bibbesworth's *Treatise*, a thirteenth-century lexicon of English phrases written for the Duchess of Pembroke to educate her children, provided the vocabulary necessary for young Anglo-Norman nobles to converse in polite society (terms describing the weather, health, and courtly pursuits, for example) and for young women to run a large household (expressions for lighting a fire, setting a table, and preparing food, among others).<sup>19</sup>

### *Pueritia*: courtesy, conduct, and manners

In fact, Chaucer's Prioress appears to have gained just such a practical education, combining proper manners and religious piety in a bilingual context (1.118–62). She learned French 'After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe' (Anglo-Norman French rather than the Parisian dialect (1.125)), and while her Latin was minimal she could sing the divine service (1.122) and



participate in the religious observances of her house. Above all, however, the Prioress is cheerful, considerate, courteous, and has exquisite table manners, reflecting the most important aspect of a young medieval girl's education, her instruction in morals and manners.<sup>20</sup> Providing a model for socializing children, courtesy literature articulated the 'rudimentary traits [which] were felt to lay the groundwork for a child's future success in schooling, apprenticeship, service, career, and marriage'.<sup>21</sup> These texts could range from sayings collections like 'The ABC of Aristotle' to courtesy books like 'The Young Children's Book' or extensive compilations like *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*.<sup>22</sup> Hagiographical collections like *The Golden Legend* or *The South English Legendary* also served as courtesy texts by including youthful episodes in the saint's life as examples of pious conduct in the face of temptation.<sup>23</sup>

Most conduct literature was aimed at young men or at both sexes, although some texts were directed exclusively at girls. 'How the Good Wijf Tau3te Hir Dou3tir', a popular poem recopied into the fifteenth century,<sup>24</sup> demonstrates how a young girl's physical desirability, religious practice, conventional piety, and gentle manners together create a marriageable young woman. The poem charts the young girl's life from childhood to the marriage offer, into marriage and relations with her husband, to her management of the household and of her reputation in town, and finally to the birth and disciplining of her own children. Ultimately, a good daughter's purpose is to become a good mother, and a good mother prepares her daughter for 'spowsynge' by gathering a dowry and dispensing womanly advice from the moment of her birth.

### *Adolescentia: raptus and marriage*

Perhaps better than any other literary text, Chaucer's *Physician's Tale* problematizes the multiple tensions of growing up female in late medieval England, for it presents a marriageable young woman caught between mutually exclusive masculine desires: the lust of judge Apis and the paternal control exerted by Virginius over his daughter and heiress. Described as a living courtesy book (6.107–9), the exemplary fourteen-year-old Virginia is portrayed exactly at the moment of social transition from childhood to marriageability: in fact, she is actually shown walking with her mother from their home to the temple as Apis plots his seizure or 'raptus'. Chaucer's explicit linkage of Virginia with courtesy (or 'good conduct') literature – which goes beyond anything in his sources – marks her as an important socio-economic asset: family status might rise through Virginia's good marriage.

While *The Physician's Tale* shares the basic plot of each of the analogues, Chaucer adds to the source drawn from Livy (*Ab urbe condita*) via

Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* (ch. 56) two major sections of material, the advice to parents and governesses (6.73–104) and the dialogue between Virginius and Virginia prior to her murder (6.212–50). In addition, Chaucer notably changes and particularizes the charges brought against Virginius in court, thus grounding *The Physician's Tale* in issues concerning marriage, wardship, and child custody in late medieval England. These adaptations explore the tensions surrounding female childhood in aristocratic circles and critique the forms of violence necessary to perpetuate that patriarchal system.

Depending upon their family's wealth, class, and social aspirations, young girls might also enter service in the household of another family to work or to be educated; in other cases girls learned a skilled trade or craft, especially in the textile arts, as cloth-maker, embroiderer, or seamstress. Service in a well-to-do household groomed a girl socially and increased her marriageability, while the craft work she learned carried over easily into the household. An unmarried female Londoner could practise her trade, or, if married, could conduct business, contract debts, and settle legal cases, under London's *feme sole* provision.<sup>25</sup> Service, like apprenticeship, provided lateral mobility between equally placed families, while both arrangements also created the opportunity for a daughter to marry up the social scale. Unfortunately, young girls in service could be mistreated, the most commonly heard complaint in the legal record being the girl's sexual exploitation.<sup>26</sup>

While girls were most often taught at home, in some cases well-born girls and boys might be educated together in a noble household not their own,<sup>27</sup> and these early relationships later bore fruit through marriage and other associations. The early, mixed affinities of noble young boys and girls, and the attendant household intrigues, love relationships, political careers, and labyrinthine exertions to establish or reassert their own 'gentle' identities are a staple of much medieval courtly literature, particularly the romance. The widely diffused poetic romance *Floris and Blancheflur* depicts two noble children, a Saracen boy and Christian girl, raised inseparably and educated together;<sup>28</sup> in accord with the well-worn story of lovers separated and reunited, the youthful pair overcomes a series of misadventures to be reunited as king and queen. One of the delights of this genre lies in the ingenious plot twists that take the young people away from their native lands and the even more outlandish scenarios that return them home. One of its negative traits is the tendency to represent young girls as objects of exchange between men, facilitating patriarchal power as potential mothers and wives. In the apt phrase of Constance in *The Man of Law's Tale*, 'Wommen are born to thralldom and penance, / And to been under mannes governance' (2.286–7). The plot elaborations of the romance genre demonstrate the degree to which

marriage seems to be an inevitable, unavoidable, even universal outcome for young medieval women. Even virginal saints eventually become brides of Christ.

### Conclusion

Medieval authors, mostly men, struggled with conflicting imperatives in their considerations of female childhood. On one hand, the successful rearing of healthy young women was both essential for the social and reproductive needs of the culture in general and necessary to the maintenance of family lineage and inheritance in particular. On the other hand, the social disenfranchisement of young girls placed them on the lowest rung of the social ladder and the conditions of medieval life often left them physically at risk. And yet these contending imperatives of female childhood create possibilities for resistance, agency, and surprise. In the *Pearl*-child's spirited 'Sir, 3e haf your tale mysetente' (line 257) or Virginia's trenchant 'Pardee' (7.240) in response to her father, we hear the echo of young medieval girls opposing, even if for only a short time, the powerful forces that compelled them to conform to conventional social roles or to accept coercive personal situations.

### NOTES

1. See J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 1–54.
2. Sue Sheridan Walker, 'Free Consent and Marriage of Feudal Wards in Medieval England', *Journal of Medieval History* 8 (1982): 123–34.
3. 'De puella'. In *On the Properties of Things: John of Trevisa's Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus De Proprietatibus Rerum*. Gen. ed. M. C. Seymour. 3 vols. (Oxford University Press, 1975–88), p. 301.
4. 'De puero'. In *On the Properties of Things*, p. 300.
5. Jacques Le Goff, ed., *The Medieval World*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (London: Collins and Brown, 1990), pp. 16–17.
6. See Play 15 in Stephen Spector, ed., *The N-Town Play: Cotton MS Vespasian D.8. EETS ss 11–12* (Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 152–63.
7. John Myrc, *Instructions for Parish Priests*, ed. Edward Peacock, EETS OS 31 (London: Kegan Paul, 1902. New York: Greenwood, 1969), lines 87–140.
8. *Ibid.*, line 153.
9. *English Fragments from Latin Medieval Service Books*, ed. Henry Littlehales, EETS ES 90 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1903), p. 5.
10. Barbara Hanawalt, *Growing Up in Medieval London: The Experience of Childhood in History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 48–9.
11. All references to *Pearl* are from Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, eds., *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*. York Medieval Texts, 2nd ser. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978). Henceforth line numbers will be cited parenthetically in the text.

12. See Matthew 18: 1–3.
13. Peter Meredith, *The Mary Play from the N-Town Manuscript* (New York: Longman, 1987).
14. Jo Ann Hoepfner Moran, *The Growth of English Schooling, 1340–1548: Learning, Literacy, and Laicization in Pre-Reformation York* (Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 43.
15. Henceforth, Chaucer fragment and line numbers are indicated parenthetically in the text.
16. John Lawson and Harold Silver, *A Social History of Education in England* (London: Methuen, 1973), p. 44.
17. Eileen Power, *Medieval English Nunneries* (Cambridge University Press, 1922), pp. 264–5.
18. See Moran, *Growth of English Schooling*, pp. 69–70; and Nicholas Orme, *English Schools in the Middle Ages* (London: Methuen, 1973), pp. 52–5.
19. William Rothwell, ed., *Walter de Bibbesworth: Le Tretiz* (London: Anglo-Norman Text Society), 1990.
20. See Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, rev. edn (London: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 45–182; and Suzanne W. Hull, *Chaste, Silent, and Obedient: English Books for Women, 1475–1640* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1982).
21. Hanawalt, *Growing Up in Medieval London*, p. 70.
22. Frederick J. Furnivall, ed., *Early English Meals and Manners*, EETS OS 32 (London, 1868; rpt New York: Kraus, 1969), pp. 11–12, 16–25; M. Y. Offord, ed., *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, EETS SS 2 (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).
23. Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, ed. and trans. William Granger Ryan. 2 vols. (Princeton University Press, 1993); Charlotte D'Evelyn and Anna J. Mill, eds., *The South English Legendary*. 3 vols. (Oxford University Press, 1956–9).
24. Furnivall, *Early English Meals*, pp. 36–47; and Tauno F. Mustanoja, ed., *The Good Wife Taught Her Daughter, The Good Wyfe Wold a Pylgremage, and The Thewis of Gud Women* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seuran, 1948), pp. 158–72.
25. See Judith Bennett, 'Medieval Women, Modern Women: Across the Great Divide', in *Culture and History, 1350–1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities, and Writing*, ed. David Aers (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), pp. 154–5.
26. P. J. P. Goldberg, ed., *Women in England, c. 1275–1525* (Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 252 ff.
27. Nicholas Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry: The Education of the English Kings and Aristocracy, 1066–1530* (London: Methuen, 1984), pp. 28–36.
28. J. Rawson Lumby, ed., *King Horn, Floriz and Blanchflur, The Assumption of Our Lady*, re-edited by George H. McKnight, EETS OS 14, 1866 (London: Oxford University Press, 1901), pp. 71–110.