

The Evolution of Childhood’s History

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When Philippe Ariès published his book *Centuries of Childhood* in 1960, he likely had no idea that his work would launch decades of discourse and conversation about the history of childhood. His assertion of childhood as a modern invention, as a life stage unrecognizable to historical peoples, was both supported and attacked by historians that followed him. In works such as Barbara Hanawalt’s *Growing Up in Medieval London*, Steven Ozment’s *Flesh and Spirit*, Rudolph Bell’s *How to Do It*, and Emily Coleman’s “Infanticide in the Early Middle Ages,” the concept of historical childhood as a recognized stage of growth is explored. Through the use of various sources, the majority of these analyses determined a conclusion vastly different from that of Ariès. The generally held view of historical childhood has shifted away from an unrecognized life stage towards the belief that childhood was a key step in the development of medieval children. Since Ariès developed his thesis, historians have come to understand historical childhood to be similar to modern childhood in the sense that this life stage was neither horrible nor ideal during the Middle Ages.

At the time that Ariès wrote *Centuries of Childhood*, a revival of macrohistory was taking place across the scholarly world, a trend represented in Ariès’s piece. His assertion that “there was no place for childhood in the medieval world”¹ and that “the indifference was a direct and inevitable consequence of the demography of the period”² is a broad one. Ariès focuses on making wide assertions about childhood from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries to the twentieth century, avoiding detailed work about the nuances and details of children’s lives. By taking a macrohistorical view of the topic, Ariès looks only at general trends and beliefs held by all of society, rather than by individuals. From this approach, Ariès concluded that medieval people saw children as little adults who never experienced a childhood stage. Using a focus on material culture, Ariès’s argument is based primarily on the conclusions he draws from paintings, clothing styles of the

time, and works of fiction. While these sources provide for an interesting analysis, they are not sufficient to use as a base for a wide sweeping statement about childhood during the time period because these sources are at risk of subjectivity and can be misinterpreted based on personal opinions. While this issue alone is enough to punch a hole in Ariès’s argument, another problem arises due to the fact that the author did not use sources from the time period he was addressing.

However, though Ariès’s ideas about childhood do not draw from objective fact and thus have a somewhat unconvincing argument, his book does set the historical stage for a decades-long discussion about the true nature of historical childhood. A counterargument in this dialogue to Ariès’s belief is outlined in Barbara Hanawalt’s *Growing Up in Medieval London*. Hanawalt writes her book in direct response to Ariès, claiming that “the Middle Ages did recognize stages of life that correspond to childhood and adolescence.”³ While she engages primarily in social history to show the heavily social aspect of growing up during the Middle Ages, Hanawalt also utilizes economic history and cross pollination to illustrate her point. By approaching the topic of childhood from several angles, Hanawalt reveals that her thesis can be upheld with respects to multiple disciplines, creating a more convincing argument. In addition, the entirety of her book is centered on the skepticism of postmodernism and is reflected in her adamant doubt throughout the work of Ariès and insistence that “socialization of children and young people into polite society occupied an important segment of medieval London culture.”⁴ The main reason that Hanawalt’s argument is so convincing rests in the fact that she uses a broad spectrum of sources, court records, coroner’s reports, government documents, and letter books, accurate to the time period, sources that she states Ariès ignores completely. Granted, she does leave out material about negative aspects of a child’s life, such as abuse of orphans, death of unsupervised children, and strict education for adulthood; Hanawalt’s agenda is decidedly to show medieval childhood

in a positive light. However, she provides a solid opposition to Ariès’s thesis, as well as establishes the convention for future historical books about childhood: the organization of information in order of birth to adulthood.

Yet not all modern works about medieval childhood carried such a defined agenda as did that of Hanawalt. Rudolph Bell, in his book *How to Do It*, refrains entirely from presenting his own beliefs about childhood to readers and gives minimal commentary, instead providing readers with text from primary sources and allowing them to make their own conclusions. Bell uses only advice manuals for the sources in his book, a choice that has both benefits and drawbacks. While these sources represent the ideal that society strives towards, it also may leave out some of the harsh realities that are associated during the time with raising children. Instead, Bell simply focuses on the concerns that the manuals specifically bring up and makes observations about the texts, such as how odd it is that “authors who wrote in such detail about how to select a wet nurse . . . would be so silent about how parents should check on a child put out to a wet nurse.”⁵ This tendency marks Bell as one who works primarily from a historicist position, presenting the past on its own terms. At the same time, Bell sometimes admits that when looking “back five hundred years . . . , we may be struck instantly by similarities with modern concerns,”⁶ revealing that he holds some presentist views about his work, comparing the past to the present. Yet Bell’s book is primarily objective and advances the discussion of childhood by allowing readers to observe the continuity of childhood through their own interpretation of sources about ideal parenting.

However, not all of the literature written about childhood since Ariès’s thesis was published upholds the recognition of a childhood; Emily Coleman’s article “Infanticide in the Early Middle Ages” paints an extremely different picture from that of Hanawalt and Bell about what childhood looked like. In analyzing population and tax documents for farms and manors during the time, Coleman comes to the conclusion that female infanticide resulted in the low numbers of women and girls. While Coleman admits that “the killing of children of some years . . . would surely be difficult to explain,”⁷ she insists that farms only supported a certain number of females and that “it would not be difficult . . . for a baby to be exposed, or simply smothered in the home.”⁸ She reaches many of these conclusions by drawing on statistical history and making analyses from the population numbers. In some sense, Coleman’s methods are comparable to those of Ariès because she uses psychohistory

to draw conclusions about people’s history based on her evidence. Yet, what makes Coleman’s point more convincing than Ariès’s is her willingness to qualify her own statements with counterarguments through her admitted use of presentism and the recognition that there may be other factors accounting for the smaller number of females in the tax documents. Even with these concessions, the reader leaves the article with a sense that Coleman would agree with Ariès that children in the Middle Ages were not highly valued and that childhood was not a recognized part of development. Coleman’s article is important to the study of childhood because it reminds historians that medieval childhood was not wholly positive.

Steven Ozment, in his book *Flesh and Spirit*, somewhat agrees with this idea. Following Hanawalt’s convention of moving chronologically through a child’s life in a book, Ozment explores childhood on a much more personal level. Rather than the official documents used by other historians, Ozment uses personal journals, diary entries, and letters to show that “the family of the past was neither as wholesome as the romantics portray it, nor as cruel as the cynics suspect.”⁹ This anti-Whiggist approach to studying childhood is most similar to Hanawalt’s method in the sense that Ozment also uses various forms of cross-pollination, including social, economic, anthropological, and intellectual history. However, Ozment’s work differs from that of Hanawalt in that Ozment takes a more intimate look at the lives of his subjects, giving the text a definite style of historicism. In *Flesh and Spirit*, readers can dive straight into the minds of people living in the time and learn from firsthand accounts that the failures of a father’s children “may have distressed their father just as deeply and their successes pleased him just as much.”¹⁰ Ozment’s tendency to accept history for how it is presented illustrates that children were both a joy and a job to parents and that historical childhood had its ups and downs. The fact that parents worried in this way about their children proves the existence of a childhood and Ozment’s book contributes further to the discussion by giving a firsthand, personal look at how the integration of childhood into society affected life in that time.

Since Ariès published his view about the nonexistence of a childhood in the Middle Ages, historians have used a variety of methods to analyze his statement. While those such as Hanawalt steadfastly oppose Ariès, others such as Coleman have come to accept parts of Ariès’s thesis. As these authors have shown us, many types of documents can be used to determine ideas about childhood of the past, including legal documents, tax records, material objects, and personal

writings. While each of these authors approaches the subject with varying degrees of presentism and historicism, each analyze the source with some amount of cross-pollination and social history. By examining the differing views of childhood, it can be established that a recognized childhood did exist during the Middle Ages and that it was similar to modern ideas of the life stage in the sense that it was neither terrible nor perfect.

Endnotes

- ¹ Phillipe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 33.
- ² Ibid., 39.
- ³ Barbara Hanawalt, *Growing Up in Medieval London* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 5.
- ⁴ Ibid., 69.
- ⁵ Rudolph Bell, *How to Do It: Guides for Good Living for Renaissance Italians* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 131.
- ⁶ Ibid., 176.
- ⁷ Emily Coleman, “Infanticide in the Early Middle Ages,” in *Women in Medieval Society*, ed. Susan Mosher Stuard (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1976), 59.
- ⁸ Ibid., 59.
- ⁹ Steven Ozment, *Flesh and Spirit: Private Life in Early Modern Germany* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), x.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 247.

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