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Medieval Children

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Professor Orme's new and lavishly illustrated work on medieval children presents the lives and activities of children in England from the Anglo-Saxon to the late Medieval periods. Although many aspects of childhood in the medieval period have been covered by other writers, Professor Orme is the first historian to attempt to discuss the topic from before the Norman Conquest to the 16th century. Accessible to the general interested reader and useful to the historian of childhood, the book includes full footnotes, a complete bibliography and a friendly index. The intention of the book is to 'reveal the richness of the material about medieval English children' (p10).

Chapter 1, Arriving, covers births, baptism, naming and record making. Family Life, the second chapter, covers family size, bringing up the baby, weaning, 'daytime' (essentially a discussion of children's diet, clothing and toilet training), 'nighttime' (sleeping arrangements and dreams), relationships between parents and children, and the lives of the poor. This last leads on naturally to chapter 3, focussing on danger and death in the lives of the medieval child. The next two chapters introduce aspects of children's play: chapter 4, Words, Rhymes, and Songs, traces the sketchy surviving examples of their oral culture. With occasional special pleading, Orme is able to identify a number of nursery rhymes specifically for children, as well as exploring the often blurred distinction between children's pastimes and adult pursuits in the medieval period. Orme even manages to include a page or two dedicated to the most rare of records, children's talk (p158-160). The examples given are all from adult sources, but the delightfully scurrilous verses do resonate with children's taunting language. Chapter 5, Play, also confronts the problem of distinguishing adult from juvenile activities, emphasising the simple fact that adults and juveniles in the medieval period shared common interests, and that children were not always segregated from adult society. However, the attempts by the crown to legislate 'educational' play for children sheds interesting light on the attitudes of adults. At the highest level, children's culture was of sufficient interest to be controlled and directed towards purposeful play (p183). Also in this chapter is a section on 'The Children's Calendar'. This charts the seasonal games and festivities of the child's year. This section exemplifies the value of Orme's work and why it represents a departure from previous works on medieval childhood; Orme is always striving to see the medieval world from the child's viewpoint, and devotes topic after topic to activities and problems that really mattered to children. Cock fights, ball games, scrumping, roasting beans – children's business is Orme's subject. Chapter 6, on the church, discusses the clergy's involvement with the raising of children, including their religious

education, Christian rites of passage, and children working within the church as clergy or as participants in the liturgy. Inevitably, given that secular and ecclesiastical life were finely interwoven in the medieval period, there is some discussion of these topics in other chapters too. Orme chooses the topics of 'Learning to Read' and 'Reading for Pleasure' for his penultimate chapters, concluding with a chapter on the transition from childhood to adulthood.

Is anything missing from this detailed, information-packed account? A more common approach to organising the discussion of medieval childhood would be to include several chapters on education: Shulamith Shahar, for example, in her *Childhood in the Middle Ages* (which covers Europe as well as England) dedicates five of her twelve chapters to the education of children from different social backgrounds.(1) Orme discusses 'Learning to Read' (chapter 7) and 'Reading for Pleasure' (chapter 8), but deliberately excludes broader issues of education and schooling in this work. As he rightly states, education is a large subject and one he has written on in more than one previous work, and it is not unreasonable to have excluded this as a separate subject requiring more intensive study than this already large book has space for.(2) In practice, the school, school books and schoolboy thoughts crop up repeatedly in the illustrations of medieval life and play. There may be no formal discussion of schooling, but truancy, writing tasks, frustration at unkind masters, and the trials of being away from home all crop up with such frequency that the school looms as large in this text as it must have done in the lives of many a medieval boy.

Studies of childhood in history have come a long way since Phillipe Ariès first published his thesis of medieval childhood in 1960, alerting historians to the idea that social history does not begin with adults, and inviting them to see the worst of man's character in his attitude to children.(3) Ariès could not 'see' children in history; their lives were of no great significance to medieval adults, and their treatment at the hands of their carers was negligent at best and brutal at worst. Since Ariès, most historians of childhood have seen a different history in their records, and have been moving away from the idea that the majority of children had an abusive upbringing. It is appropriate, then, that with a new millennium, Nicholas Orme has offered a work in which the page seems to have been turned on the past as an unsavoury place for children. Death, abuse and infanticide are certainly part of Orme's narrative, but this dark side to life is balanced by portraits of loving, cherishing parents and carers, and happy children absorbed in their play, or comfortably ensconced within the family. Orme presents a comprehensive and evocative picture of the life of the medieval child from birth to adolescence, exploring the relationships between children and the cultural institutions that surrounded them. Baptism, birthdays, disablement, playtime, family life and preparation for adulthood are presented through the chronicles, paintings and, to a lesser extent, the material culture of the period. In Orme's populated pages, we are introduced to hundreds of medieval children going about their business – Peter Carew, playing truant from school and later humiliated for it in public by his father (p85); a boy named Durand who had a small stone lodged in his ear (p111): Dorothy Plumpton, a teenager miserable at having been sent away from home as part of her upbringing (p318) – names, incidents and the minutiae of children's lives, games and emotions teem within the pages of this book.

Compared to earlier discussions of medieval childhood, Orme's presentation of loving parents, caring teachers and a considerate judiciary may seem to be a sweetening of the past, but it represents an admirable determination to show the positive aspects of medieval childhood and parenting, rather that dwelling on the grim, brutal, and quite probably unrepresentative material that survives in the records of courts and coroners rolls. Moreover, he is at pains to explain the reasons for some of the apparent brutality of medieval childhood, and to show how accessible medieval emotions and thought patterns are to us. In his section on infanticide and abandonment, for example, Professor Orme insists that 'medieval people, like us, regarded such deeds [as infanticide] with horror' (p95). Later, we are advised that 'the medieval families that came closest to

modern ones in providing support for children's reading were those of the wealthier and literate people' (p274). When it comes to the crowded sleeping arrangements of the later medieval period, Orme cautions us that 'people get used to sleeping in groups, and one can be as lonely in a dormitory as in a private room' (p79). Teenage sex and pregnancies 'could be as surprising and unwelcome to adults as they are today' (p331), and even the notorious 'Italian relation', in which a 16th century Italian visitor to London describes parents heartlessly turning their children out of their homes to work in hard service as apprentices, is questioned and reinterpreted. Altruistic and indulgent parents were trying to better the lives of their children (p310). Ariès said; 'look how differently children were treated in the past because parents did not care about their children; isn't this interesting?' By contrast, the starting point for Orme's presentation of childhood is that parents and carers normally loved their children. In a sense, his vignettes of children at play, children learning to read, children helping around the home, say 'look at medieval childhood, see how consistently medieval parents treated their children the way modern parents do: isn't that interesting?' In one sense, yes. Orme's sympathetic treatment of medieval childhood creates an enthralling and intimate social history. But where does the discipline of research into the history of childhood go from here?

The difficulty arises because the book conveys no real sense of development in the history of childhood in this period. Orme claims to be covering the period from the 7th century to the 16th – some 900 years of societal change and development, but his medieval children show little growth or change, with the notable exception of an interesting and important discussion of names, where Orme traces the shift in the popularity of names from the Anglo-Saxon, through the Viking and into the Norman periods, showing how the political climate and prevailing ethnic power groups had a direct impact on the names chosen by parents for their children, even if the most popular names were at odds with the parents' own cultural background. If medieval childhood was static through 900 long years of war, Conquest, agricultural change, urbanisation and theological upheaval, as this book, for the most part, implies, and if medieval childhood, with its nursery rhymes, reading for pleasure and upsetting teenage pregnancies is really very similar to modern childhood, then there is, after a book such as this, no point in studying the subject further.

Fortunately, the impression this book creates of a world in which most medieval children throughout this time span experienced broadly similar childhoods is, to a large extent, accidental. In spite of his intentions stated at the outset, Orme too often refers to 'the medieval child' engaged in some activity, giving the impression that a 9th century Aelfric would have a similar lifestyle and expectations as a 16th century Nicholas. In part, Orme is drawn into this trap by the inevitable contrast between the sparse evidence available for the Anglo-Saxon period and the wealth of documentary records from the very end of the medieval period, and perhaps for the general reader, this broad brush approach is not a problem; only an academic pedant would feel obliged to point out that this book says very little about Anglo-Saxon childhood and a great deal about the late medieval period. Large portions of the book have nothing to do with pre-Conquest society: discussions of apprenticeship and the drift of adolescent workers into towns, for example, are presented in general terms, as though common to medieval society throughout the period. Revealingly, Professor Orme begins a section on 'stories and memories' by claiming that 'it is easy to find evidence about medieval children as they were seen by others' (p338). If only this were true for the Anglo-Saxon period!

But, as Orme's discussion of children's names illustrated, societal changes do have an impact on the culture of childhood. What is static through time, and what Orme and others have convincingly demonstrated, is that parents cared about their children. But what is worthy of study, is what parents did, at different times and under different circumstances, in order to do their best for their child. None knows better than a modern western parent how the demands and pressures of society

lead to internal conflict and much compromising between the desire to protect your offspring and the desire to do what is ‘right’, and what was ‘right’ for an Anglo-Saxon child was surely very different, because society was very different, to what was ‘right’ for a 16th century child.

This does not come across in Orme’s book, however, because this is only a book (albeit a very, very good one) about 13th to 16th century childhood in England, with occasional reference to the earlier period.

Nicholas Orme has done a tremendous amount for the medieval child in this very enjoyable and readable book, but fortunately, it is not the last word in the study of the subject.

Notes

1. Shahar, S. *Childhood in the Middle Ages* London, Routledge, 1990.Back to (1)
2. For example, see Orme, N. *English Schools in the Middle Ages*, London and New York, 1973; *Education and Society in Medieval and Renaissance England*, London and Ronceverte, 1989, and *Education in early Tudor England: Magdalen College Oxford and its School*, Oxford, 1998.Back to (2)
3. Ariès, P. *L’Enfant et la Familiale sous l’ancien Régime*, Paris, 1960.Back to (3)

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