

Anja Müller (Ed.)

## Childhood in the English Renaissance



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## **Childhood in the English Renaissance**

Ed. by Anja Müller. -

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Cover Image: Giovanni Francesco Caroto, *Boy with Drawing*, c.1525  
Oil on wood. Museo di Castelvecchio, Verona, Italy

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## Childhood in the Renaissance – Introductory Remarks

Anja Müller

A young boy, with conspicuous carrot-coloured hair is looking at us, directly, frankly, a broad smile beaming on his face. The source of his mirth is, apparently, a drawing he produced – a drawing of a man in the matchstick style typical of young children's drawings. The illustration on the cover of the present volume, Giovanni Francesco Caroto's *Boy with Drawing*, is remarkable for various reasons. Painted around 1525, its depiction of a young boy caught in a moment of leisure is outstanding in its realistic representation of a young child at a time when portraits of children positioned the young figures within religious or mythical surroundings or within family groups. Such portraits also revealed difficulties with representing children in the life-like manner that renders Caroto's painting so captivating. In view of comments uttered by historians of childhood that early modern children were regarded as small adults and were represented respectively, the *Boy with Drawing* appears almost modern. The reality effect owes much to the drawing within the drawing, which reflects accurately the developmental stage of drawing of this particular age group. The child's immature artistic skills are depicted faithfully – and with no disparaging attitude. On the contrary, the immature artistic production of the child contributes to the mirth the painting evokes. One can, with Angela Rosenthal, perceive the portrait as the painter's comment on different age-specific, developmental stages of artistic production (605-7). The reasons why I selected Caroto's painting for the cover of the present volume are threefold: First, as already mentioned, the painting's realism illustrates that childhood in the Renaissance was perceived as a stage of life with its own peculiarities. Second, the image exemplifies the heterogeneity of views of the child: it deviates from more common representations of the infant Jesus, of putti or cupids, or little adults. Third, the portrait gives evidence that children's lack of maturity was not necessarily a reason for disrespect or despise but could even become a source of pleasure. All three aspects imply a perspective on childhood in the Renaissance that challenges traditional ideas of Renaissance children dying early, being treated like small adults, or being educated so that they pass on from childhood into adulthood as quickly as possible. Last but not least, the *Boy with Drawing* is one of the rare tokens explicitly acknowledging the creative production of children. Historical studies of childhood often lack sources that could provide evidence for children's voices, their own cultural production and, hence, their agency. Caroto's painting with its drawing-within-the-painting, at least imagines a product of childish creativity. By conflating an adult's and a child's artistic productions within the frame of the same painting, Caroto's *Boy with Drawing* simultaneously raises awareness to age distinctions.

The distinct qualities attributed to the age of childhood during the Renaissance were in the focus of the conference "Childhood in the English Renaissance", held at

the University of Siegen in February 2012, on which the present volume is based.<sup>1</sup> The conference took cognizance of the fact that, for a considerable time now, the holy trinity of race, class and gender has been expanded by further identity categories. In the wake of 9/11 and the ensuing debates on fundamentalism, for example, religion has stepped into the foreground; less spectacular socio-cultural shifts connected with demographic change have turned our attention towards age. It is interesting to note that studies on age and ageing tend to emphasize only one particular stage of life, namely old age. This may be due partly to pressing economic concerns, partly to the respective researchers' own concerns with their ageing process. Be it as it may: in view of the general supremacy of old age in age studies and in view of the fact that 'age' includes various periods of life, I would argue that studies on childhood ought to be regarded within this larger frame of age studies, as well.

In recent British and American literary and cultural studies, one can definitely discern a trend towards studies on childhood in the new millennium. Ashgate's rapidly expanding book series "Studies in Childhood from 1700 to the Present", edited by Claudia Nelson, clearly caters to this interest. The title of the series, however, also hints at a prominent bone of contention in the field: by defining the temporal scope of the series "from 1700 to the Present", the general editor of Ashgate's series subscribes to the credo that the beginnings of childhood concepts should best be examined from the eighteenth century on. This is doubtlessly indebted to the theses pronounced in the groundbreaking *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime* by Philippe Ariès, to which any introduction to a study on conceptualizations of childhood must briefly pay homage. Having done so, I must, of course, hasten to add that it is a truth commonly acknowledged today that Ariès's theses have meanwhile been challenged and revised. Scholars have actively extended the source material and are now considering – as one could see in the contributions to the conference – not only novels or portrait painting, but any printed source and non-written material: journals, pamphlets, legal texts, tombstones, sermons, ballads, children's literature, diaries and other autobiographical writings, satirical prints, woodcuts, to name but a few. Moreover, the firm location of the child in what Laurence Stone theorized as the affective nuclear family has recently been challenged by studies that undercut the normative position of this family model (e.g. Ruth Perry's *Novel Relations*). Most importantly, numerous scholars have successfully refuted Ariès's claim that the concept of childhood which clearly distinguishes between child and adult, renders childhood a very particular phase in life that is worthy of special attention, affection and care, and which finds its fulfilment in af-

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1 The conference was generously supported by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and the Faculty of Philosophy of Siegen University. During the event, Maren Gottschalk from Westdeutscher Rundfunk interviewed participants for a feature on the history of childhood in the WDR 5 radio programme "Leonardo" (broadcast on 15 March 2012). I wish to thank Simone Herrmann, Mary Grace Kannapin and Nadine Pilawa for their invaluable help in preparing and organizing the conference; special thanks are due for Maria Severin's expert handling of the manuscript.



fectionate family bonds, emerged only during the eighteenth century. After the publication of Ariès's study, this thesis soon met with resistance from the camps of Medieval and Renaissance scholars who took great pains to prove that there was more continuity in the history of childhood concepts as Ariès and his followers would make you believe. The works of Nicholas Orme, James Schultz, Shulamith Shahar, Barbara Hanawalt, Albrecht Classen, Leah Marcus or Linda Pollock have assembled enough convincing evidence on that matter. Therefore, there is hardly a scholar around today who would not acknowledge that children did enjoy the attention and emotional investment of their parents even before 1700. Lloyd de Mause's nightmarish psycho-history of childhood has been replaced by more differentiated studies with less anachronistic bias.

It seems, however, as if the refutation of the more sweeping accounts of Ariès, Stone, Shorter, Cunningham and the like has resulted in a certain distrust towards generalizing approaches. Considering current monographs on childhood in the early modern period, one will find that they are predominantly concerned with particular case studies.<sup>2</sup> The most prominent topics include childhood or children in Shakespeare (or other literary works)<sup>3</sup>, maternity (Laoutaris), adolescence (Krausman Ben-Amos), infanticide or other issues related to children's death (Avery), the impact of Puritanism, political implications, parent-child relations, child actors (Lamb) or children's literature (Immel; Wooden). Additional major concerns are education (Moncrieff and MacPherson) and gender questions (Miller and Yavneh). The preference for the case study method in Renaissance scholarship may owe much to the legacy of New Historicism. On the other hand, the focus on particular aspects also reflects an awareness of the heterogeneous character of early modern childhood.

If one considers eighteenth-century studies on childhood, they will at some point address the discursive formation of childhood in that period. As a consequence, childhood is regarded as a discourse with a particular social, economic and political function. The most common assumptions about childhood in the eighteenth century emphasize the inseparable link between childhood concepts, the interests of the emerging middle class, democratizing processes and the rise of capitalism. Forming an integral part of institutionalizing processes (such as the family as core and carrier of society), the conceptualization of childhood in the eighteenth century serves as a point of refer-

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2 So Benjamin Roberts's article on the history of childhood in the *Encyclopaedia of Childhood*.

3 See, for instance, Kate Chedgzoy, Susanne Greenhalgh and Robert Shaughnessy, eds., *Shakespeare and Childhood*; Andrea Immel and Michael Witmore, eds., *Children and Children's Books in Early Modern Europe, 1550-1800*; Steven Kavanagh, *Shakespeare and the Politics of Childhood*; Chris Henry Partee, *Childhood in Shakespeare's Plays*; M. Rutkoski, *The Mouths of Babes: Children and Knowledge in English Renaissance Drama* or Michael Witmore, *Pretty Creatures: Children and Fiction in the English Renaissance*.

ence for norms and values (see Müller). After all, as David Kennedy reminds us, concepts of childhood are always also concepts of adulthood.

The present volume embarks from the question in how far the insights and approaches pertaining to research in eighteenth-century childhood concepts can also be traced in the early modern period. With their special focus on the English Renaissance, the articles in the present volume can help to answer the question in how far the discursive character of childhood is indeed a modern phenomenon or whether and in how far concepts of childhood already acquired the character of a discourse or a *dispositif* (in Foucault's meaning of the words) in the early modern period.<sup>4</sup> As mentioned above, studies on early modern childhood have so far dealt with the social or political significance of childhood, with gender distinctions, with religious influences on childhood concepts, with educational matters, literary or artistic representations of children, or with the question of affective family ties. If these individual case studies deliberately eschewed generalizations in order to emphasize the diversity of childhood concepts, it should nevertheless not be anathema to venture a more comprehensive approach.

The conference on which the articles in the present volume are based, undertook such an attempt. The proceeding volume therefore assembles essays on philosophy, literary studies, history, cultural studies, science and the visual arts, dealing with birth, child care, children's literature, children in literature, children in politics, royal children, and children's death – to name but a few of the topics addressed. While exploring these heterogeneous manifestations of childhood in the English Renaissance, the volume also intends to evaluate critically the status of childhood in the political, social and cultural context of the Renaissance. In how far do the constructs of childhood in the English Renaissance amount to a more coherent structure of thought that endows the age of childhood with a distinct social and cultural significance that would allow us to speak of a veritable discourse? In order to constitute a discourse, the conceptualization of childhood needs to be of a particular quality. Did childhood, hence, function in the English Renaissance like a Foucauldian *dispositif*? In other words, can we discern a systematic, even strategic connection between different 'local centres of power knowledge' that developed around childhood – different areas of knowledge or practices that were interlinked and endowed with certain strategic functions or, at least, implications? Such an approach is necessary if one indeed wishes to corroborate or refute Ariès's thesis. What is at stake is not whether children and childhood were considered important or given affection in previous ages, but whether the conceptualization of childhood in form of a discourse is solely a modern phenomenon. Do we find such a strategic network of different fields of knowledge around the child during the Renaissance? If yes, to what degree? Which discourses are involved? What are the goals? Can one identify any differences to later centuries in these respects? Or shall one draw the conclusion that childhood was a relevant concept in the English Renaissance, but that this concept should rather be called pre-discursive? That is, there was an interest

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4 On childhood as a *dispositif* see the introductory chapter in Müller.

in children and childhood, there were different fields of knowledge, one cared for children and endowed them with a certain (symbolic) significance – but despite all this one cannot discern the thick, densely interwoven web of knowledge and practices, least of all the strategic rationale of a veritable discourse. These are the guiding questions which have informed the present volume.

In a first step towards an exploration of these questions, the opening three essays of this volume engage with general conceptualizations of childhood in the English Renaissance. Sonja Fielitz begins her essay with gauging the numerous appearances of children in Renaissance theatre, especially in Shakespeare's plays. Even if these literary children have not yet met with great scholarly interest, their almost ubiquitous presence in Renaissance theatre refutes the assumption that children were insignificant in that period. In the main part of her contribution, Fielitz takes cognizance of what Naomi Miller and Naomi Yavneh quote as the "best-known fact" (Miller and Yavneh, "Introduction", 2) about Renaissance childhood: the high mortality rate. Investigating representations of grief in relation to representations of children or childhood in early modern literature Fielitz takes issue with the thesis that early modern parents did not allow strong emotional bonds with their children because of the high mortality rate. If that thesis were true, grief for a child would be a rare display of emotions. Arguing against this myth, Fielitz explores early modern literary discourses on grief alongside philosophical treatments of the passions. By reading these discourses as manifestations of intense self-expression, and by pinpointing texts where the grief focuses on a child (either as the object of grief or as the bereaved person herself), her essay sheds new light on the conceptualization of early modern childhood with regard to the dualism of body and soul. Fielitz's close reading of poems and plays by Anne Cecil de Vere, Ben Jonson, John Skelton, William Shakespeare and Thomas Heywood also draws attention to further problems that arise when it comes to literary representations of children's emotions. Whereas literary texts yield insights into existing concepts of childhood, the voices of children are hard to assess in a medium produced by adults. In her attentive readings, Fielitz uncovers the many difficulties surrounding the endeavour of adult writers to endow the infant, who is speechless by very definition, with a voice. The literal speechlessness of the infant is perhaps one of the most intriguing features of early modern childhood that demands further exploration. Simultaneously, Fielitz's assessment points at a crucial problem which historical studies of childhood encounter inevitably: history is written by adults. Our views of childhood, therefore, are necessarily filtered through adult lenses, no matter how much these representations struggle for verisimilitude. Writing about childhood in history, hence, essentially amounts to writing about childhood concepts (which is no less worthwhile).

Probably the most pervasive concept of childhood is the idea of childhood innocence. Commonly associated with Romanticism or with its flourishing in the Victorian period, this idea is still prevalent today, when it informs educational practices and reform, legislation or family policy. Historical studies of childhood traditionally tend to perceive the idea of innocence as a watershed separating pre-modern and modern

concepts of childhood. By detaching childhood from the idea of original sin, a secular approach to childhood becomes possible. Locke's idea of the child as a 'blank slate', a projection screen for impressions, prepares Rousseau's later positive affirmation that the children are not just non-descript neutral beings, but that they are inherently good. Matthias Bauer's contribution adds to this well-known development of childhood innocence further historical depth. Discussing character studies by John Earle, metaphysical poems by Henry Vaughan and Thomas Traherne and passages from Shakespeare's plays, he provides evidence that the conceptualization of childhood in the Renaissance already deployed the idea of the child as blank paper or even as angelic alongside the Puritan notion of original sin. This constellation of ideas renders the child ambiguous: the Renaissance child was on the one hand seen as a yet imperfect adult, on the other hand, the child was considered to be the original idea of man, and in this latter conceptualization, the yet 'unwritten' – or uncorrupted – child could become a model human being. The blessed state of childhood, Bauer contends, was abandoned in the course of life and could, if at all, only be retrieved in old age.

Anja Müller traces a similar ambiguity in her essay on so-called Stairs of Life, a popular iconography of the ages of man, in which early childhood and old age often were paralleled. Prints of different stages of life arranged along a flight of stairs were a popular way of visualizing ideas about human life. Apart from the notion that such prints express a progressive, linear concept of life, Müller perceives in the iconography used for particular stages of life a symbolic order of age. Notwithstanding the great interest in and concern with childhood that is evident in the literary texts discussed in the present volume, the Stairs of Life nevertheless attribute a comparatively low status to this particular period in life. True enough, childhood is significant because it is the first stage in life, and because it may even be a stage towards which a human life will finally evolve again. But the stairs also contain concepts according to which childhood is considered the pre-human stage of life – a period where the young being has not yet reached a full degree of humanity. As Josephine Billingham's essay on infanticide shows, such concepts can account for the many practices surrounding early modern childhood that are difficult to access for twenty-first-century scholars.

More accessible to a contemporary audience are the concepts that can be deduced by most of the literary texts assessed in the volume. Bettina Boecker demonstrates that these texts sometimes addressed a dual readership, when she scrutinizes John Taylor's miniature edition of John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* of 1616. Her interest in this edition is twofold. First and foremost, Boecker suggests that this edition targeted child readers – not only because of the small format of the volume. As she provides convincing evidence for her thesis by drawing on statements on the reception of Foxe's book as well as on internal evidence – that is comments in the *Book of Martyrs* on its intended readership – Boecker proves that age-specific literary productions for children already existed in the early modern period. In a second step, she then investigates how children were represented in Foxe's martyrology, and draws conclusions about the conceptualizations of childhood that were offered to child readers themselves. One of the key in-