

Bringing medieval children out of the shadows.

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Bringing Medieval Children Out of the Shadows

Candace Barrington

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Bringing Medieval Children Out of the Shadows

Candace Barrington

Children have not figured in most cultural histories of England's medieval period. Even as medievalists have brought into sharper relief various subgroups marginalized by either their times or ours, medieval children have been kept in the shadows. One reason for this is the apparent paucity of information left from the Middle Ages for historians to create a full picture of the earliest years of human development. We don't have the firsthand accounts of childhood that we have from other periods, such as Augustine of Hippo's fourth-century accounts of his boyhood escapades and education. Nor do we have extended or careful observations of medieval children's emotional life or the material particulars in either expository or imaginative literature. This information gap led scholars in the mid-twentieth century to conclude that childhood did not exist as a mental construct during the Middle Ages.

Philippe Ariès, the most famous of the historians promoting this thesis, based his conclusion on three phenomena. As Orme summarizes them, "[m]any children died young, all lived closely together with adults, and most were sent away from home in youth to school or to service in other people's houses" (4). From these, Ariès concluded that medieval adults didn't view children as different from themselves. His influential argument continues to be repeated today, "especially among those who are not medieval historians" (5), even though several studies in the past twenty years have re-examined old data and uncovered new evidence to show that medieval children were not treated simply as small adults. These newer studies have shown that families provided furniture and eating utensils scaled for children, [End Page 203] the church devised specific sacraments to integrate them into Christian society, and schools and apprenticeships prepared them for the next phase, adulthood. Though childhood was not the privileged stage during the medieval centuries it has become in contemporary American culture, we now have evidence that childhood was recognized and that children were treated differently from adults during the Middle Ages.

Nicholas Orme, prolific historian of the everyday in premodern England, continues this reconsideration of medieval childhood. Many of his books remain the authoritative account of their subject matter. A quick look at their titles reveals his interest in the small things and quiet people shaping medieval life (rather than the big ideas or looming historical figures). He is interested in *The Minor Clergy of Exeter Cathedral*, not the archbishops of Canterbury; he studies *The Saints of Cornwall*, not Saint Thomas à Becket. From these overlooked subjects and understudied sources, he has led the way in limning the everyday lives of men and women, aristocrats, clergy, and peasants—and now boys and girls—in medieval England.

Orme divides *Medieval Children* into nine handsomely illustrated chapters—"Arriving," "Family Life," "Danger and Death," "Play," "Church," "Growing," "Words, Rhymes, and Songs," "Learning to Read," and "Reading for Pleasure"—these last three of particular note regarding children's literature. Despite the very broad title (and a cover illustration by a Flemish painter), Orme's subject is more accurately medieval *English* children, about whom he covers every facet of childhood, from birth to death, at home, in school, and in church. Besides being extraordinarily informative about the concerns of children in medieval England, the book provides exemplary discussions of background material for the nonmedievalist. Orme gathers, sorts through, and analyzes coroners' reports, church documents, burial markers, manuscript illustrations, family letters, wills, sermons, fiction, and material artifacts. Quite adept at teasing out information about quotidian affairs from arcane sources, Orme finds enough evidence in these scattered sources to claim confidently that children were "a prominent and well-recorded group of the population" (10).

Chapter four, "Words, Rhymes, and Songs," traces children's oral culture from infancy to youth. To document baby talk, he discovers the practice of lisping or oversimplifying language attested to in scholarly works from the later Middle Ages. He also provides fragments...

Reviews

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Medieval Children, by Nicholas Orme. New Haven: Yale UP, 2001.

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Acts of Reading: Teachers, Text and Childhood, the epithet is not available protective mythological Christian-democratic nationalism.

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