

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-04854-6 - Books for Children, Books for Adults: Age and the
Novel from Defoe to James
Teresa Michals
Excerpt
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CHAPTER I

Introduction

In a 1960 trial over the British publication of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, prosecutor Mr. Mervyn Griffith-Jones opened his case by asking the jury not only, as we might expect, "would you approve of your young sons, young daughters" reading this book, but also "is it a book you would even wish your wife or your servants to read?" Titters were heard in the courtroom. The jury, which included a dockworker, a butcher, and a dress machinist, ruled unanimously for publication. In his closing address the counsel for the defense summed up the assumptions about age and print that he believed had caused that laughter. He dismissed the prosecution's concern to protect women and the working class as "an echo" from an earlier time, leaving age as the only serious criteria for dividing up the general reading public. And important though young readers were, they were not in fact the most important age-leveled group to be considered: "Society cannot fix its standards by what is suitable for a young person of 14," he flatly declared.¹ Whether or not *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was a bad book for children, it deserved to be published because it was a good book for a new figure, one recently granted a central place in literary matters: the adult. Worrying in 1900 that being obliged to write for the multitude of "boys and girls" who read novels prevented the serious artist from producing great work, Henry James would have greeted this new deference to the adult reader with delight.²

How did *adult* come to matter so much as a description of literature? How did readers judge the value of a novel before they could rely on this term to mean that a piece of writing was aesthetically excellent, ethically complex, sexually explicit, or any of these? *Books for Children, Books for Adults: Age and the Novel from Defoe to James* describes the relationship between the novel and modern ideas of adulthood. Children's reading has been examined historically since the publication in 1960 of Philippe Ariès's ground-breaking work, *Centuries of Childhood*.³ But the notion of the adult reader has not received this attention, since adulthood is usually assumed to

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be historically constant. This assumption is incorrect. Both who counted as an adult and the importance of any idea of adulthood varied widely through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – as they still do. *Books for Children, Books for Adults* helps to open a new area of inquiry: the emergence of the idea of books intended specifically for adult readers in the writing and the reception of English novels. Before this emergence, I demonstrate, the novel was written for a mixed-age audience, one that was primarily imagined not in terms of age but of social status and gender – the audience that still lived on in Mr. Griffith-Jones’s imagination in 1960. At the same time, when earlier novelists and their readers considered the ideal age of the novel’s audience, they tended to claim that the most important member of that audience was “the young person” rather than the adult.

As twenty-first-century readers, we may assume that there have always been adults-only novels, and that we recognize them when we see them because they have distinctive qualities: perhaps they minimize didacticism, for example, while foregrounding formal complexity, sexual content, or moral ambiguity. Rejecting this assumption, I argue that eighteenth-century novels were written not for adults but rather for a popular mixed-age audience of women, children, and servants. At that time, women and servants of all ages were routinely lumped together with children as the ideal – or the nightmare – reader of popular vernacular print. Thus, while we may imagine that children’s literature was an offshoot of literary forms intended for adult readers, that is not the case. Rather, the opposite is true. The first commercially significant age-specialized publishing appeared with the rise of a distinct market for children’s literature in the middle of the eighteenth century. These children’s books contrasted with novels intended for a mixed-age audience – not with novels intended for adults. Specialization by age for adults occurred only much later in the history of the novel. Through most of the nineteenth century, the novel’s core readership remained mixed-age. If we think of children’s literature as emerging out of “adult reading,” and as changing “adult” conventions of form and content to make them suitable for children, we reverse the order in which fiction was in fact age-leveled.

Books for Children, Books for Adults traces this history of adult reading from Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* to Henry James’s *The Awkward Age*. It offers a series of case studies of key eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels, popular in their day and canonical today. While the book examines ideas of adulthood within these novels, it also aims to raise questions about reception and the history of the book. Thus it provides a wider focus on

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less familiar adaptations of these novels, adaptations that were designed to target readers by social status and gender as well as by age. In addition to considering the different kinds of readers that these different versions of the novels seem to imply, it considers comments made by the novelists themselves about their intended audiences, the pronouncements of professional critics, and, where possible, responses from ordinary readers of various ages. In doing so, it explores the reasons why some books originally written for a mixed-age audience, such as *Robinson Crusoe*, eventually became children's literature, while others written for this same audience, such as *Pamela*, became adult novels. Seeing literary history within the social history of age, *Books for Children*, *Books for Adults* also examines why, at the turn of the twentieth century, authors such as Henry James finally resolved to write for an audience of adults only. Fundamentally, it argues that in these novels and in the history of their marketing and reception, we can see how a world of masters and servants became a world of adults and children.

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It is difficult for us today to imagine a reading audience that is not age-leveled. As Mitzi Myers notes, sheer "habit makes it hard to think of earlier child and adult readers as inhabitants of one literary world, or at least of parallel reading worlds with more permeable boundaries than those we are accustomed to."⁴ We work within a framework of national standards of primary and secondary education, a framework that carries with it a powerful set of working assumptions about how reading levels correlate with stages of individual development, as well as the assumption of near-universal adult literacy. These assumptions can of course still be problematic today. When we look back at earlier centuries, the equation of adulthood with literacy becomes even more misleading. To be sure, a developmental tradition linked to numerical age runs from Puritan devotional works through children's literature, the *bildungsroman*, and psychological realism. This tradition influences not only the thematic content of the literary canon as we know it, but also the classrooms, the databases, and the floor plans of public libraries and bookstores in which any given novel now appears, clearly identified as Adult, Young Adult, or Juvenile. In contrast, after meticulously tracking the eighteenth-century child reader through sources such as marginalia, letters, diaries, and book-sellers' records, M. O. Grenby concludes that in this earlier period, "there was seldom rigid segregation between literature for children

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and for adults and little stigma attached to cross-reading in either direction.”⁵

Through the eighteenth century and much of the nineteenth, writers often cared more about social status than age when discussing reading. Moreover, when they refer to age, it is generally not to a sense of numerical age tightly keyed to a widely accepted developmental scale that assigns each book its appropriate place in the world. Rather, age itself appears as a kind of corollary of social status. As Andrea Immel suggests, age is often imagined through a number of other social categories: “it is usually a bundled set of associations – childishness with, say, servitude or femininity – that structures action and perception at any given time.”⁶ This sense of age reflects political subordination: in this context, the opposite of the child is not the adult, but rather the master. As late as 1810, referring to “those popular narratives, which are the amusement of children and the lower classes,” Walter Scott invokes this older understanding of age and reading. Seeing “children and the lower classes” as a single category of readers runs counter to the idea of adulthood as a developmental category that begins for all people at, or at least around, a particular numerical age. Scott suggests an earlier and weaker sense of adulthood by conflating age and social status. For him, working people of all ages and young people of all classes are the same kind of reader. However numerically old or young they may be, what is most important about them all is that they are not gentlemen. That is, they lack both a gentleman’s independent property and his education. Eighteenth-century printers often followed this set of assumptions in targeting elite readers with expensive books and poorer readers with cheap books rather than dividing up the market by numerical age.

Like social status, gender often weighed more heavily than numerical age in describing readers. Ian Watt calls attention to this way of thinking when he remarks that elite eighteenth-century writers imagined maturity through their ideas of both status and gender. He points to the literary importance of one set of norms, “the norms of the mature, rational and educated male world.” This idea of maturity as equivalent to educated masculinity often leads to the confusion of gentlemen in particular with adults in general: “the Augustan stresses on masculine and adult values . . . are, of course, functionally related; as when Chesterfield told his son that ‘Women . . . are only children of a larger growth’ (September 5th, 1748).”⁷ Such comments invoke age as a way of describing and of reinforcing social inequalities rather than age as a developmental scale that, at least in principle, cuts across both status and gender.

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This older, blurry sense of age is especially important for the novel. In considering earlier eighteenth-century novels' reception, readers still can be usefully categorized not in terms of numerical age, as either adults or children, but rather in terms of status and gender, as either gentlemen or everybody else.⁸ Most of the people who bought novels in the eighteenth century were educated gentry and professional men. But for most of that century, novels were also read by and strongly associated with a mixed-age audience of non-elite readers – an audience that included both “children of a larger growth” and very young people. For example, William Warner stresses the commercial importance of the novel's appeal to an unusually broad audience, in terms of age as well as status: “The novel's ability to assemble a diverse group of readers – women and men, the learned and the barely literate, the young and the old – enabled the successful novel to build a large general audience.”⁹ This blurry sense of age also suggests why, as Myers writes, even today, “children and the newly literate often constitute an undifferentiated audience.”¹⁰ Contemporary scholars often work against this older habit of conflating age categories with status categories. They insist that in psychological terms an illiterate or semi-literate adult is an entirely different sort of person from a child.

This modern idea of adulthood cuts across social status and gender. Although imperfectly realized, it is an egalitarian ideal, one whose influence has increased over the last two centuries. Frances Ferguson notes both the centrality and the difficulty of the distinction between adults and children in modern political thought: “The ability to treat children as different from adults is almost as fundamental to modern political thinking – of a more or less liberal cast – as any distinction we make politically . . . it is a distinction that is all the more fundamental for being extraordinarily difficult to correlate with actual empirical descriptions and a specification of one's criteria.”¹¹ In order to weigh so heavily against older ways of describing and ranking people, this idea of adulthood requires something more specific in addition to liberal principles: a standardized, widely accepted numerical scale. “Practical tests” of age once determined what people could do on a daily basis. For example, a medieval burgess's son generally came of age whenever he could count, measure cloth, and tell a good coin from a bad one and so conduct business for his father.¹² In contrast, no matter what their level of personal maturity, gender, or property, unless barred by felony, all American citizens today become eligible to vote at the same age. Unlike the cloth measuring test and the inherited right to the family shop, this idea of adulthood is an abstraction backed by nothing more than faith in the number 18. Feminism and queer theory have made us familiar with

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the ways in which systems of ideas and institutions shape which human biological differences matter in terms of gender and what they mean. Age systems do similar work. As Steven Mintz argues, “age categories are not natural; rather, they are imbued with cultural assumptions, meaning, and values.”¹³ These assumptions, meanings, and values change over time: “Far from being static and unchanging, age categories and age consciousness have shifted profoundly in distinct historical eras.”¹⁴ Today we readily think in terms of numbers in reflecting on who we are, and routinely offer proofs of numerical age in establishing our identity to others. Perhaps the very centrality of numerical age to our ways of thinking makes this a difficult category of analysis on which to gain critical distance. The impact of educational, medical, psychological, and legal age norms on our daily lives may prompt us to take numerical age as a straightforward aspect of human identity. As Myers notes, age-leveling is a habit.

It is important to remember (as well as, perhaps, hard to imagine) that until the early eighteenth century most people in England did not know their numerical age. Keith Thomas points out that it was only then that “awareness of their numerical age came to form part of most men’s basic self-consciousness.”¹⁵ Through the early eighteenth century, numerical age was something that one kept track of (or – more often – retroactively estimated, usually in good round numbers) only for special occasions, particularly in a legal context.¹⁶ And such occasions then occurred less often for people than they do for us today. “The real pressure on men to know their ages,” writes Thomas, “came from the lawyers, who constantly worked to replace practical tests of age by numerical ones, and from the bureaucrats and legislators, who specified precise numerical ages for an increasing number of civil rights and duties.”¹⁷ Mintz similarly calls our attention to the novelty of our own routine preoccupation with demarcating age by number: “Contemporary societies’ fascination with age stands in stark contrast to earlier societies’ rather vague and amorphous age categories.”¹⁸ Of course, these earlier societies knew that human beings change through the course of a lifetime. Mintz’s point is that such change meant less than it does now, and meant different things from what it does now: “no society is unaware of age, and historians need to ask what age meant or entailed in societies that lacked the rigid age categories and the intense age consciousness of western societies in the mid-twentieth century.”¹⁹ That is, in thinking about age consciousness before the twentieth century, we should look for differences, not for an absence. The difference that this book concentrates on is the rise in importance for the novel of a numerically grounded idea of adulthood.

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Serving a variety of social purposes, ways of measuring age often differ sharply from each other. Early modern writers, for example, inherited medieval schemes of the ages of man, but “could not agree about the numbers.”²⁰ Early modern religious handbooks, literary works, and the woodcuts of popular ballads represented as few as four to as many as eleven stages. Childhood, youth, and adulthood nearly always appear in these schemes, but their numerical range varies wildly. For example, Thomas Fortescue claims youth runs from the age of twenty-two to forty-two, while Richard Mulcaster places it “from seven till one and twenty.”²¹ *The Office of Christian Parents* (1616) claims youth begins at fourteen and ends at twenty-eight. Aristotelian biology divided human life into the three phases that are still familiar today: growth, maturity, and decay. Also popular, however, were Galenic physiology’s scheme in which the four body humors controlled human life, and Christian theology’s analogy between “the ages of man and the six historical ages of the world.”²² Furthermore, Ptolemaic astrology “divided human life into seven ages, each corresponding to a planet in an order unfolding from the earth to Saturn, and each associated with specific qualities. . . . There were other traditions which divided life into three, four and six ages, as well as seven and even eleven and more.”²³

When thinking about numerical age before the middle of the eighteenth century, rather than looking for one well-recognized number that correlates to our developmental sense of adulthood as the central phase of life, perhaps we should think instead of different numbers around which significance tended to cluster for different kinds of people. Some of these important numbers are quite low, and they all vary by gender as well as status. Boys’ lives were often counted by sevens, while girls’ lives were counted by sixes: “ancient mental habits, based on a septenary numerology . . . made twenty-one, like seven (the end of innocence) and fourteen (the age of discretion), into a point of particular significance in a boy’s life. (For girls the reckoning tended to be duodecimal: six, twelve, and eighteen.)”²⁴ Additionally, when examining age across time, it is especially important to be conscious of terminology. Although familiar terms about age appear quite early, in context, these words may tell us only that they do not mean what we expect them to mean. For example, while we tend to take as a good marker of adulthood official acceptance into the working world in general, or the military in particular, from 1918 to 1924 “boy” was the lowest rank in the Royal Air Force.²⁵ Similarly, while we generally understand sexual availability as a central attribute of adulthood, the early modern term “*boy* readily elided . . . with . . . *whore*.”²⁶ What looks like a familiar age of

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legal majority, twenty-one, appears reassuringly early in medieval common law – but in this context, twenty-one is rather “the knightly age.” Most medieval tenants were in fact out of ward, able to inherit land, to make binding contracts, and to perform military service at fourteen or fifteen. Only those who held land by knight service gained their inheritance and the ability to contract (for things other than necessities) so late, supposedly because a medieval knight’s armor was heavy and medieval combat was complex: only at twenty-one would men be strong and skillful enough to fight for their overlord carrying that much metal.²⁷

The word adolescence, or “adolescence” or “adolescencia,” appears as early as the 1400s, but formal descriptions of “the ages of man” tend to exclude it, as do court records. Early uses of adolescence often seem interchangeable with youth – but neither term reliably corresponds with our sense of a crucial developmental phase that begins with puberty. Sources that distinguish between the two sometimes disagree on whether adolescence precedes or follows youth.²⁸ Moreover, although lust is important to early descriptions of youth, puberty itself as a time of sexual development receives remarkably little attention. Extended medical descriptions of physical development related to puberty begin to appear around the middle of the seventeenth century; as Paul Griffiths explains, “there does not seem to have been any clear and considered medical opinion about sexual development in the earlier period *c.*1560 – *c.*1640.”²⁹ And it is only in the early eighteenth century that discussions of puberty figure in a significant number of popular medical texts, the cheap and enduring “little books” described by Paul-Gabriel Boucé.³⁰ Most important for this study, even the term “adult” must be read with caution. In his 1656 manual on family life, Thomas Cobbett mentions “Adult persons” – but only to explain that he includes the overwhelming majority of such persons, all those who are in a subordinate position to the master of a household, “in the notion of children.” He urges the reader to “remember . . . that under the notion of children, in this discourse, are understood, all such as are in the relation of children, whether Adult persons, or children in Age.”³¹ Such an open assertion of the permanent subordination of “Adult persons” gives us pause because, in principle, the modern idea of adulthood overrides social status and gender. This egalitarian aspect of adulthood is at times disregarded today, but it is an ideal with important cultural influence.

Even today, however, the numbers we so routinely use do not always add up to one consistent identity. What an adult is depends on why one is asking the question, now as well as in earlier centuries. Medicine offers the most definite numbers. The American Academy of Pediatrics and Infancy, for example, holds that after one’s twenty-second birthday, one is for medical

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purposes an adult. One now has a reasonable expectation of living much longer as an adult than as a child or adolescent, and medical norms reflect this fact. In contrast, when life expectancy was shorter, adulthood may have had less prominence. In the early modern period, for example, people seem to have been more likely to live nearly half of their lives in the category of “youth.”³² Sandwiched between youth and an old age unsoftened by modern affluence, sanitation, or medicine, adulthood was only one stage of life, as fleeting as all the others.

Law defines adulthood a bit less crisply than does medicine. As Joseph Goldstein remarks, in law, “adult” remains a relatively unmarked term, a category that consists of what is left over after all the special exceptions have been made: “‘Adult,’ unlike ‘child,’ is a word infrequently used in secular law . . . law defines an adult primarily by implication: its meaning is determined by the general exceptions provided for the non-adult – the infant, the minor, the juvenile, and the unemancipated person.”³³ Law relies on two different ways of conceptualizing adulthood: the age of license and the age of majority. License refers to the age at which one has one’s government’s permission to perform specific acts: for example, entering into legally binding contracts, purchasing and drinking alcohol, leaving school, voting, or marrying. The age of majority is a broader legal recognition that the authority and responsibilities of one’s parents or guardians have ended. The age of majority varies from place to place, as does the age of license to engage in specific activities. For most US states, the age of majority is eighteen (in Mississippi it is twenty-one; in four other states it is nineteen), while the age of license can be both higher and lower. Despite its variability, the entire range of ages at which we now hold people fully accountable for crimes or allow them to form binding contracts is much higher than it was in the past, suggesting a greater commitment to some age-leveled idea of personal maturity: in sixteenth-century England, for example, four-year-olds made binding wills, seven-year-olds married, eight-year-olds were hung for felonies, and propertied teenagers “routinely” became members of Parliament.³⁴

A psychological idea of adulthood as a set of internal qualities that mark the maturity and autonomy of the individual is the most resonant of all these concepts for the contemporary study of literature. This idea of age is crucial for classifying books according to their appropriate readership, as adult, young adult, or juvenile. It is also crucial for analyzing characters within such books and for judging their merit as a whole, as in the claim that a truly “adult” work shows maturity of taste and ethical judgment. The psychological idea of adulthood is also, however, the most difficult to specify in terms of numerical age: it is a vanishing point as well as an

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age-leveled norm. This psychological idea of adulthood is a latecomer. Psychology is of course a younger field than either medicine or law; moreover, even in terms of concentrated attention from the profession of psychology, adulthood is something of a novelty. It first appears as a kind of framing device for the study of adolescence at the opening of the twentieth century. If adolescents are people who have left childhood behind and are moving towards a new developmental goal, “adult” is what we call them once they get there.³⁵ In comparison to the richly charted, tumultuous development of the adolescent, however, this definition of adulthood seems fairly shadowy. It is also harder to assign it a number. Contemporary psychological studies of adolescence tend to end around the age of eighteen – but there is no consensus that nineteen-year-olds have achieved adulthood. Some psychologists suggest the term “emerging adulthood” to characterize people from eighteen to thirty;³⁶ others use the term “quarter-life period”; others suggest a “novice phase” stretching to the age of thirty-three.³⁷

As the endpoint of adolescent development, adulthood suggests a range of highly admirable personal qualities: one fairly typical checklist includes “the attainment of cognitive self-sufficiency, emotional self-reliance, and behavioral self-control.”³⁸ But such lists describe an ideal that many of us never attain at any age. Looking for the high standard of ethical awareness that Erik Erikson identifies with adulthood, for example, James Côté notes that it “is an ideal to which many – perhaps most – do not rise for reasons of discrimination, ignorance, and distraction.”³⁹ Similarly, pioneering developmental psychologist Jean Piaget suggests that the use of hypothesis and deductive reasoning characterizes adulthood – but then finds himself wrestling with the failure of many adult research subjects to demonstrate these formal reasoning structures. “Can one demonstrate, at this level of development [the period from fifteen to twenty years] as at previous levels, cognitive structures common to all individuals?” he asks.⁴⁰ Other developmental psychologists answer in the negative, claiming that “most adults do not use hypotheticodeductive reasoning in all aspects of their lives and many do not use it at all,” making this a “dubious criterion” for adulthood’s achievement.⁴¹ While the category of “emerging adulthood” implies that the positive personal qualities it foregrounds will indeed emerge, given enough time, here researchers are more skeptical. The psychological sense of adulthood as an age-leveled norm (even a norm defined as generously as starting anywhere between eighteen and thirty-three) is in tension with its meaning as an aspirational ideal.

Before the twentieth century, such questions about adulthood were less pressing. Less was at stake in any age-leveled norm of maturity. A major