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978-0-521-76814-6 - Romanticism and Childhood: The Infantilization of British Literary Culture

Ann Wierda Rowland

Excerpt

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Introduction: The infantilization of British literary culture

An anonymous and, frankly, forgettable essay in the September 1807 issue of *Monthly Literary Recreations* takes up the ponderous yet predictable question of “Whether the Present Age Can, or Cannot be Reckoned Among the Ages of Poetical Excellence.” Beginning with a restatement of what he describes as the generally held opinion that the present age is characterized by a “mediocrity of talents” in all branches of the arts and sciences, the writer equivocates and ultimately, while claiming to disagree, agrees. “We have not one whose transcendency of genius is capable of electrifying and astonishing the public mind,” he admits, but then the public has become so accustomed to excellence that “their minds are no longer capable of being astonished at any thing”; we have no Milton or Shakespeare, he insists, but we do have many who are “far above mediocrity in their writings.”¹ Damning with faint praise at the outset, the rest of the short piece is, itself, an exercise in mediocrity as the writer composes his list of above average poets, first apologizing for the omission of “many whom I have either not met with, or at the present moment not recollected,” then turning fussy and refusing a few names that did apparently come to mind, but whose inclusion may have “brought [the] list into disrepute.”²

Only two recent tendencies in contemporary poetry disturb this critic’s bland approval and come in for criticism: the “effeminately poetical junto” of the Della Cruscans, on the one hand, and the “over affected simplicity [that] has usurped its place and crept into the works of some of our really otherwise excellent authors” on the other. While the Della Cruscans’ “monotonous” harmonies, “affected sensibility” and “glitter of imagery” threaten the “energy of thought and diction, manly feelings and even sense” of present-day poetry, the “simplicity” of poets such as Southey and Wordsworth has also failed to restore manly vigor to the poetry of the age. Indeed, when such poets “descend to what they call their beautifully simple style,” they simply remind this critic of the

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[More information](#)

“namby pamby songs of the nursery.” It is this identification of “simplicity” as a significant and new feature of recent poetry and, even more interesting for our purposes here, the comparison of this new poetry to nursery rhymes that makes this essay noteworthy.

Noteworthy, however, only as evidence that these rhetorical evocations of the nursery were common currency in literary discussions, for, like the poets he describes, this critic is neither singular nor original in his comparison of contemporary poetry to nursery songs and children’s literature. He himself cites a recent review of Wordsworth’s poetry by Lord Byron as also criticizing the poet for his nursery sensibility. In that review, which appeared the previous month in *Monthly Literary Recreations* and which Thomas Moore cites as his first, Byron praises some of the pieces in Wordsworth’s *Poems in Two Volumes* for their “native elegance” and their “natural and unaffected” sensibility, but he also objects strenuously to many of the poems, especially the series entitled “Moods of my own Mind.”³ These, Byron complains, are written in “language not simple, but puerile” and are “neither more nor less than an imitation of such minstrelsy as soothed our cries in the cradle, with the shrill ditty of ‘Hey de diddle, the cat and the fiddle.’” “What will any reader or auditor, out of the nursery, say to such namby-pamby,” Byron asks, concluding with the regret that Wordsworth “confines his muse to such trifling subjects.”⁴

Criticism of Wordsworth’s trivial subjects continued, as did the complaint that his overly simplistic language and trifling subject-matter were products of the nursery or of a childish or infantile sensibility. When Francis Jeffrey’s review of *Poems in Two Volumes* appeared the very next month in the *Edinburgh Review*, he also sounds this keynote and develops its theme still further. For Jeffrey, Wordsworth’s latest volume continues the “alarming innovation” first evidenced in *Lyrical Ballads* of mixing “originality” and “natural feeling” with “vulgarity,” “silliness” and “childishness.”⁵ It is Wordsworth’s diction that is most objectionable to Jeffrey, and he warns that “no poetry can be long or generally acceptable, the language of which is coarse, inelegant or infantine.” Jeffrey compares Wordsworth’s poems to the “ditties of our common song writers,” dismissing them as “namby-pamby,” as “babyish absurdity,” and as “childish verses” that are the “very paragon of silliness and affectation.” When he does praise a piece, such as “The Character of the Happy Warrior” or “Song, at the Feast of Brougham Castle,” he points to its “manly lines” and wishes that Wordsworth would “throw aside his own babyish incidents” more often. Jeffrey has praise for Wordsworth’s

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

3

sonnets and admits that there are “occasional little traits of delicate feeling and original fancy” in the two volumes, although they are “quite lost and obscured in the mass of childishness and insipidity.” “Resolution and Independence” is singled out for particularly severe censure, but Jeffrey seems to be rendered almost speechless by those poems that unite a childish subject with a child-like style. He simply lists and quotes with almost no commentary what he calls the “ineffable compositions” of “Moods of my own Mind,” introducing “My Heart Leaps up When I Behold” – the short piece that contains Wordsworth’s most famous line on childhood, “The Child is Father of the Man” – with simply “This is the whole of another,” as if the poem manifestly condemns itself in its brevity and triviality. Of the “Ode” that concludes the volume – the poem that will become Wordsworth’s most popular in the nineteenth century and the period’s manifesto of childhood – Jeffrey can only say: “This is, beyond all doubt, the most illegible and unintelligible part of the publication. We can pretend to give no analysis or explanation of it; – our readers must make what they can of the following extracts.”

In the language and images of these reviews, the shape of the larger literary culture – its shared discourse, points of contestation and habits of self-presentation – comes into view. The persistent rhetoric of infancy and childhood we find here is not simply a strategy for a particularly belittling critique of Wordsworth alone, but is, we will see, a central feature of how the Romantics understood, described and evaluated the literature of their day. That more is at stake in his review than Wordsworth’s *Poems in Two Volumes*, Jeffrey makes very clear. Indeed, he defends the severity of his criticism of both *Lyrical Ballads* and the present volume (the infamous review of *The Excursion* is yet to come) with the claim that the growing influence of this “new school of poetry” necessitates the very strongest words. The *Lyrical Ballads*, Jeffrey admits, were “unquestionably popular,” even, he grants, “deservedly popular”; they have been “quoted and imitated” and have helped to establish a poetic “system” which has “excited a good deal of attention.” Condemning Wordsworth and his “brotherhood of poets,” Jeffrey suggests that he sets himself against the dominant poetic movement of the day: what the poets call a turn toward natural expression and a simplicity of language and subject matter, and what Jeffrey, and Byron before him, call childishness and triviality.

Jeffrey’s essay thus also makes clear the extent to which the increasingly vernacular quality of the poetry of the day was associated with and described as a return to the nursery, to the songs and rhymes of childhood. Wordsworth gives us the most famous declaration of a

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

vernacular poetics in the “Preface” to the *Lyrical Ballads* when he states his intention to “chuse incidents and situations from common life” and to relate them “in a selection of language really used by men.”⁶ But he also insists that his turn to the “real language of men” entails a rejection of the “gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern artists” and that he thus cuts himself off from the “phrases and figures of speech which from father to son have long been regarded as the common inheritance of Poets.” Jeffrey will have none of Wordsworth’s claim to originality and voluntary disinheritance, insisting that “Wordsworth and his friends” are “as much mannerists, too, as the poetasters who ring changes on the common-places of magazine versification.” These “new poets are just as great borrowers as the old,” Jeffrey comments, “only that, instead of borrowing from the more popular passages of their illustrious predecessors, they have preferred furnishing themselves from vulgar ballads and plebian nurseries.” By turning to native, vernacular and popular literature – Jeffrey mentions ballads and immediately associates them with nursery lore – the new poets have threatened the “manly” strength of English literature and the elite status of its verse.

In short, the new poets have infantilized the literature and literary taste of the present day: they have introduced trivial and insignificant subjects, diminished the strength, refinement and high seriousness of style, and returned literature to an earlier, more primitive state. For Romantic scholars, such attacks on the Lakers’ low subject matter, vulgar or common language, and affected primitivism are familiar and much discussed, and yet the fact that these charges are delivered in a rhetoric of infancy and thus associated with childhood and childish things has not been sufficiently addressed.⁷ This study will take seriously this charge of infantilization, but will expand our understanding of what it means to say that the literature of the period we now call Romantic was characterized as infantile and childish. A condemnation of contemporary poetry in the hands of Byron, Jeffrey or, later, Thomas Love Peacock, the evocation of infancy and childhood also supports an account of the origins of poetry according to Johann Gottfried Herder and Percy Bysshe Shelley, justifies the preservation of traditional ballads according to Walter Scott and other popular antiquarians, offers a model for how adults read and respond to literary texts according to Thomas Reid and Anna Letitia Barbauld, and enables a developmental account of literary history according to Thomas Blackwell and Hugh Blair, to name only a few of the ideas about literature articulated in and through a rhetoric of infancy and childhood. Thus, although this study begins and ends with Wordsworth’s poetry, in the

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

pages between it tracks a rhetoric of infancy and childhood – the images, phrases, metaphors and figures of children and childhood – through a wide range of Enlightenment and Romantic writing: philosophical treatises on the origin of language and human understanding, conjectural histories, literary histories, defenses of poetry, defenses of popular poetry, children’s reading primers, ballad collections, folklore collections, educational treatises, lyric poems, autobiographical writings and historical novels.

What emerges from this survey of Romantic-era writing is evidence of a broad discursive shift in the understanding and evaluation of literature, a shift that I am calling “the infantilization of literary culture.” While “infantilization” does labor under a cloud of pejorative associations (fully deployed in Jeffrey’s review, as we have seen), the term can also bring the period’s significant engagement with childhood, children and childish things into focus in ways that have not been sufficiently clear nor adequately examined. How and why childhood and the figure of the child became so important to such a wide range of Romantic writers has long been one of the central questions of literary historical studies. We will find new answers to this question in the period’s concomitant rise of a vernacular literary tradition. In the Romantic period the child was “discovered,” as we will discuss below, coming fully into its own as the object of increasing social concern and cultural investment; at the same time, modern literary culture consolidated itself along vernacular, national lines. By examining the intersections of these social and historical developments, this study will examine how a rhetoric of infancy and childhood enabled Romantic writers to construct a national literary culture capable of embracing a wider range of literary forms. New theories about infancy, mental development, early language and childhood memory gave this period innovative ways to value and include the most trivial and popular literary forms within a native culture and national history. In turn, the newly expanded sense of national and popular literature that emerged in these years brought children and childhood into the arena of cultural production and reproduction.

While some of the values associated with infancy (depreciatory or otherwise) are very much the concern of this study – the attempt to bring the unvoiced, gestural and non-semantic elements of language into literary culture, to incorporate nursery rhymes and popular ballads into a national literary tradition, to preserve innocence within the field of cultural production, to create a poetry of the trivial and insignificant – my aim is not solely to describe an ascendancy of the values typically

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

associated with infancy and childhood within Romantic literary culture. I am equally interested in the ways in which the figure of the child and notions of infancy and childhood served as rhetorical and conceptual tools in the long process of re-thinking human history, language, development and literature that we call the Enlightenment. The first half of this study, therefore, moves through a variety of Enlightenment and Romantic texts in order to demonstrate the centrality of an idea of infancy and a rhetoric of childhood to the new accounts of language, literature and history that emerged in these years. The second half of this study then turns to popular antiquarianism to track how new ideas of the child's mind and memory enabled new ways of accommodating popular literature within a national literary tradition.

THE DISCOVERY OF CHILDHOOD

Historical studies of childhood – whether social, visual or literary, such as this one – understand and discuss childhood as something that was “discovered” at a particular historical moment, by which they mean that there was a period in which a set of social factors and cultural practices cohered to bring children and childhood into greater focus and importance in the larger culture than previously seen. To speak of this process as “the discovery of childhood” is meant to defamiliarize and estrange what can easily be seen as a universal and ever-present fact of human life. Childhood becomes not something that we all have and, therefore, that all humans have always had, but something more like a new planet that floated into view on a particular night or a new species arduously tracked and meticulously described by an intrepid explorer. Another frequently used and related phrase, “the invention of childhood,” pushes the element of estrangement still further, as if childhood had not even been there to be found, but rather was something made, made up, or constructed to fill a need, explain a phenomenon, or fool a crowd.

Such rhetoric of discovery and invention reveals some key assumptions about the historiography of childhood that this study shares. First and fundamental is the notion that, in Steven Mintz's words, “childhood is not an unchanging biological stage of life but is, rather, a social and cultural construct that has changed radically over time,”⁸ an idea that sets the historical study of childhood apart from the biological.⁹ “Biology” in such a statement is, to put it rather more crudely, another way of saying “body,” and thus the historical study of childhood insists that the physical factors of human development do not, in themselves, add up to

Cambridge University Press

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Ann Wierda Rowland

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The discovery of childhood*

7

“childhood” and should certainly not be taken as evidence of a universal experience of childhood. Histories of childhood go further, in fact, claiming not only that cultural, economic and social factors play an equally important role as the biological, neurological and psychological in shaping what childhood is, but also that they determine just how we perceive, describe and manage the biological or bodily “facts” of children and childhood. The need to defamiliarize childhood, to separate it from its physical state and to insist on its susceptibility to change, remains an important charge and defining principle of historical studies of childhood.

The second critical assumption underlying the historiography of children and revealed by its rhetoric of discovery is that the history of children and the history of childhood are two different things. Thus Hugh Cunningham distinguishes between “children as human beings and childhood as a shifting set of ideas,” and James Christen Steward insists on a distinction between “a social history of *children* and a cultural history of *childhood*.”¹⁰ Historians who are interested in documenting the lived experience of children in a particular place and time, Cunningham notes, must always “tease out the relationship between ideas about childhood and the experience of being a child.”¹¹ They must, in other words, always mind the gap between adult notions of children and childhood – whether articulated in parenting manuals, autobiographies, social policy or literary texts – and the children being described or the experience of being a child. Histories of childhood that focus primarily on conceptions and representations of children and childhood are thus more accurately described as histories of adult ideas about childhood, and that is one reason why we can posit a “discovery” or “invention” of childhood even though children have always existed.

Rhetorical elaborations of “the discovery of childhood” are, in fact, as old as the historiography of childhood itself, and the phrase should be seen as the founding conceptual metaphor of the discipline.¹² “The discovery of childhood” not only entails the emergence of the idea that childhood is an important stage of life, but also the idea that childhood is its *own* stage of life, a time separate from adulthood with its own unique qualities and experiences. Thus the gap between adults and children – by which I mean both the difference between adult ideas of childhood and the lived experience of children, as well as the assumption that childhood is a distinct time of life to be held and studied apart from that of adulthood – is another fundamental tenet of childhood studies, an idea that emerged at a particular historical moment and has been subsequently reinforced by the rhetoric and disciplinary boundaries of the field.

In crafting his account of “the discovery of childhood” in *Centuries of Childhood*, the 1962 study unanimously acknowledged as the seminal text of the field, Philippe Ariès describes the emergence of a “sentiment de l’enfance,” an ambiguous phrase, as Colin Heywood points out, “which conveyed both an awareness of childhood and a feeling for it.”¹³ Ariès took what has subsequently been called the “sentiments approach” (as opposed to the “demographic approach” or the “household economics approach”), one often criticized for being more speculative than factual, for focusing on adult ideas of childhood rather than the experience of actual children, and, given the affective investments that childhood so readily inspires, for being overly influenced by emotion and fantasy.¹⁴

Adult feelings for children and ideas about childhood are without doubt tricky and ambiguous objects of study. Dating the emergence of a new “sentiment de l’enfance” is even more precarious and controversial. Historians have dated “the discovery of childhood” across many years and even centuries. Ariès notoriously declared that there was no idea of childhood in medieval society; he and other early scholars, such as Lloyd de Mause and Lawrence Stone, argued that attitudes toward children changed fundamentally over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁵ Later historians sharply criticized their accounts of childhood in the medieval period, arguing for a robust and relatively stable interest in children from the medieval to the modern period.¹⁶ Yet in a convergence of opinion significant for our purposes, the period most frequently cited as that in which childhood was “discovered,” that in which ideas of childhood and the experience of being a child changed most dramatically, is the eighteenth century. “Framed by the writings of John Locke at its beginning and of the Romantic poets at its end, and with the strident figure of Rousseau at centre stage,” writes Hugh Cunningham, “for most historians the eighteenth century holds pride of place.”¹⁷

What is striking about this privileging of the eighteenth century is that, despite the acknowledged importance of Locke and the significant social and economic changes that were already in place to make a mid-century text such as Rousseau’s *Emile* possible and popular, the child that is “discovered” or “invented” in the eighteenth century is most often referred to as the “Romantic child.” For scholars of Romantic literature, this nomenclature appropriately reflects their sense that the writers of this period dramatically transformed the representation of childhood and the figure of the child in literature. Thus Peter Coveney begins his study with the claim that “until the last decades of the eighteenth century the child did not exist as an important and continuous theme in English

Cambridge University Press

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Ann Wierda Rowland

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The discovery of childhood*

9

literature.”¹⁸ Art historians make similar claims, crediting the paintings of Sir Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Gainsborough, Sir Thomas Lawrence and Sir Henry Raeburn with the invention of a new image of childhood that they, too, commonly label “the Romantic child.”¹⁹ Perhaps the new child of the eighteenth century is named for the last decades of the period because it was not until these later years that the demographic and social changes affecting childhood and children were given full cultural and artistic expression. That the artists and writers of what we call the Romantic period created images of children that powerfully condensed and encapsulated the new ideas of childhood that had been circulating and gaining pace over the course of the century is indeed a generally accepted feature of Romantic literature and culture.

But the idea of the “Romantic child” does more than refer back to and embody ideas of childhood developed over the course of the eighteenth century; it also gestures ahead to the ideas of childhood that will dominate Western culture well into the twentieth century. Thus the “Romantic child” is also often called the “modern child” and studies of the “discovery of childhood” in the latter half of the eighteenth century also claim to trace the “origins of modern childhood.” Steven Mintz’s history of childhood in America points to the early years of the nineteenth century as the moment when modern, middle-class childhood was invented, one supported by new mandatory school attendance laws, restrictions on child labor, a sharp reduction in birthrate and a host of institutions devoted to children’s health and education, but one that he also labels “Romantic,” using the images and rhetoric of Wordsworth, Rousseau and Bronson Alcott to describe the ideas and ideology underpinning this new middle-class version of childhood.²⁰ Anne Higonnet’s study of the Romantic child often conflates the modern with the Romantic, pointing to a “modern Romantic child” that emerged in elite art forms in the latter decades of the eighteenth century and then tracking its diffusion into popular, commercial culture over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.²¹ For these scholars and many others, the “Romantic child” earns its sobriquet because it is essentially an idealized, nostalgic, sentimental figure of childhood, one characterized by innocence, imagination, nature and primitivism, qualities associated with Romanticism that survive today in very few cultural figures, the child being one of the most enduring. Thus perhaps the child that emerges in the eighteenth century is called “Romantic” to signal our sense of its modernity, our recognition that in the images of childhood from these years we see our own assumptions about children and childhood first taking shape.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Ariès gestures toward the modernity of the Romantic child in his discussion of one characteristic that will be particularly important to this study: the child as a figure of the primitive. The child's association with primitivism appears in Rousseau's writings, Ariès writes, but it is an idea that really "belongs to twentieth-century history." Writing in 1960, he adds that "it is only very recently that it passed from the theories of psychologist, pedagogues, psychiatrists and psycho-analysts into public opinion."²² George Boas' contemporaneous study, *The Cult of Childhood*, also treats the idea of the primitive child as a largely twentieth-century phenomenon. While Rousseau, according to Boas, suggests that childhood is "something inherently different from manhood" and something "midway between animality and humanity," it is not until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that these primitive associations with childhood develop into the full-blown theories of cultural and historical recapitulation so central to early anthropology, psychology, sociology and paidology.²³ The belief that the child represents the childhood of the race as a whole, that the life of the individual reproduces the history of the race, has social and psychological applications that shape academic and popular ideas of human history and culture well into the twentieth century.²⁴

What is important about the history of the idea of childhood as Boas tells it is the extent to which he traces its influence on larger ideas of history and culture. Indeed, Boas' interest in childhood came out of work undertaken with A. O. Lovejoy on the history of primitivism; his study is unabashedly a history of childhood, as opposed to children, and his topic is the role that ideas of childhood have played in how twentieth-century American society explains the world as a whole. What his study makes evident is something that many more recent and more specialized histories of childhood have forgotten: that the images and ideas of childhood first articulated or "discovered" in the eighteenth century have radiated outward, shaping subsequent ideas of history, psychology, subjectivity, human culture and artistic endeavor. Thus the "Romantic child" can seem uncannily familiar to us not simply because it embodies ideas of childhood that we somehow still believe, or because this ideal child has remained somehow magically "fixed" and unchanged into the modern day, but because the ideas associated with childhood that emerged in the Romantic period, and the rhetoric and images that gave them shape, became foundational to the dominant cultural and historical paradigms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and thus to how, for a significant period of time, we have explained the world.