

Women and Children Last: Background Notes on a Cultural Distortion

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The relationship between the institution of childhood and the ways in which women in our culture are manipulated and controlled is a complex and disturbing one. Several feminist writers have commented, either in passing or at length, upon the way in which the full emancipation of women and of children are interdependent, that improvements in the status and condition of one group will inevitably improve the status and condition of the other.

Terms like "the institution of childhood" or "the myth of childhood" have arisen largely as a result of the exposure by social historians of how recently our concept of childhood has emerged. In modern Western culture it is assumed that childhood is a strikingly different experience from adulthood and must therefore be treated accordingly. We expect behavior and reactions from children which are totally different from those we expect from adults. When a child's behavior or reaction closely resembles that of an adult, we tend to respond by regarding it as "cute" and it becomes the object of playful (but, arguably, offensive) ridicule. Shulamith Firestone has shrewdly pointed out how frequently this pattern of response to children's actions parallels the response to women in our culture. Both groups find that their actions are defined and interpreted in a very limiting way, and individuals in both groups often respond by trying to

exploit this system of definition and interpretation by colluding with it. Children, Firestone suggests, quickly learn to "act cute" to gain approval much in the same way as women learn to "act feminine."

The two crucial features of the modern concept of childhood are its protracted duration and, secondly, our emphasis on the vulnerability of children. Philippe Ariès² has documented, by means of reference to medieval and Renaissance painting and literature, the way in which, in medieval society, the child, once it was no longer an infant, was dressed in miniature versions of adult clothing and assumed the rights and responsibilities associated with adulthood. Ariès regards the school as the social institution which initiated a delayed entry to adult life. In his view, the Renaissance school, with its emphasis on corporal punishment and discipline through humiliation, created a new social substratum whose members were deprived of the privileges and freedom usually attached to persons of their social rank:

There was . . . a tendency to diminish the distinctions between childhood and adolescence, to push adolescence back towards childhood by subjecting it to an identical discipline. Inside the school world, the adolescent was separated from the adult and confused

with the child, with whom he shared the humiliation of corporal punishment, the chastisement meted out to villeins.

Thus a childhood prolonged into an adolescence from which it was barely distinguished was characterized by deliberate humiliation. The whole of childhood, that of all classes of society, was subjected to the degrading discipline imposed on the villeins. The concept of the separate nature of childhood, of its difference from the world of adults, began with the elementary concept of its weakness, which brought it down to the level of the lowest social strata. 3

Although the prolonged childhood clearly had its disadvantages in the temporary loss of social status resulting from the treatment meted out in the schools, the extremely protracted childhood has traditionally been associated with privileged social groups. It is still very noticeable that childhood is both briefer and less sharply distinguished from adulthood in lower socio-economic groups. Most startlingly, however, Ariès' evidence shows that the "privilege" of childhood was seldom extended to female children of any social class:

. . . the attempt to distinguish children was generally confined to boys: the little girls were distinguished only by the false sleeves, abandoned in the eigh-

teenth century, as if childhood separated girls from adult life less than it did boys. The evidence provided by dress bears out the other indications furnished by the history of manners: boys were the first specialized children. 4

The implications of this omission of female children from the developing concept of childhood are still in effect. Texts on child-rearing, and, even more noticeably, books about adolescence tend to refer consistently to "he" as if all children were male. In part this omission of the female child is only another aspect of the tradition in our culture of using generalities with the masculine pronoun, thereby relegating females to a subspecies of the human race requiring special mention if they are to be included in any general statement. However, it is striking how frequently, in books about adolescence, the writer will rather irritably declare that his findings can have no relevance to females.⁵

One can observe a great many other ways in which girls are excluded from the "privilege" of the prolonged childhood. It is a tenet of popular lore about child-rearing that girls can be expected to "mature more quickly" than boys, although the precise ways in which this might be the case, or indeed the criteria on which one could possibly evaluate a concept so vague as

"maturity" on a comparative basis, are rarely spelt out.

While the "right" to a prolonged childhood is denied to female children, as women, they are never accorded the full privileges of adulthood. The law often "protects" both women and children in identical ways. In many countries, for example, all individuals under sixteen and all adult women are currently prevented by law from working underground in mines. In less formal contexts, women are constantly, sometimes "affectionately," sometimes abusively, compared to children. It is still standard for middle-aged women to be referred to and to refer to themselves as "girls" and, thus, in an age-segregated society be relegated to a cultural limbo.

I would suggest that this belief that women closely resemble children derives much of its impetus from the fearfulness of female sexuality which reached such a pathological level in the Victorian period. The most cursory reading of Victorian literature reveals how fiercely the nineteenth century bourgeoisie believed in the purity (i.e., the asexuality) of children. Under pressure of so many ambiguous and fearful feelings in relation to sexuality, it is not surprising that middle-class Victorian men promoted the idea to themselves and to their wives that women were "like children" and

therefore, by implication, not sexual beings. A good deal of bizarre mythology resulted from this attempt to stifle female sexuality by promoting a comparison with the "asexual" child. In William Acton's monumental work on prostitution, published in 1857, the author has consoling advice for young men who may "fear" that their wives may be as apparently sexually excitable as "the loose women of the London streets." He points out that the prostitutes' desire is "counterfeit" and that this results in young men's misapprehending women's real nature:

. . . it is from these erroneous notions that so many young men think that the marital duties they will have to undertake are beyond their exhausted strength, and from this reason dread and avoid marriage The best mothers, wives, and managers of households, know little or nothing of sexual indulgences. Love of home, children, and domestic duties, are the only passions they feel.⁶

It is significant here that the love of children is portrayed as the female equivalent of male sexual desire. This association is even stronger in Acton's prescription for dampening down any unfortunate symptoms of sexual desire in the "married female:"

If the married female conceives every second year, during the nine months that follow conception she

experiences no great sexual excitement . . . while women are suckling there is usually such a call on the vital force made by the organs secreting milk that sexual desire is almost annihilated. 7

Crucially, then, it was by association with the idea of childhood, either through the function of child-bearing, or by being a "child-wife," like David Copperfield's Dora, that the whole issue of significant sexual relationship within marriage was avoided.

The Victorian insistence on childhood asexuality was not without its many inevitable ambiguities. One of the most striking is the way in which the eleven or twelve year old "virgin" was one of the most sought-after varieties of prostitute.⁸ Obviously the high value placed on the child prostitute represented, in some paradoxical way, a quest for "purity." In the mainstream of Victorian culture this tendency to turn the child into a sexual object while at the same time insisting that children were asexual is nowhere so clearly shown as in the popularity of photographs of naked children. Charles Dodgson, who as Lewis Carroll was the author of the "Alice" books, photographed numerous naked female children.⁹ Dodgson was careful to obtain the permission of the child's mother beforehand and the fact that permission was so rarely





refused suggests that Victorian parents saw nothing unusual in his request. All Dodgson's photographs of naked children have since been destroyed, but something of his ability to unconsciously invest the child with a sexual quality which is inextricably mixed with sentimentality can be seen in his famous photograph of Alice Liddell posed as a beggar child.

The growth of a prurient attitude towards children, accompanied by the belief that the "pure" child could redeem the adult, was facilitated by the way in which children's lives were becoming more and more separated from those of adults. The level of fantasy increased as the varieties of interaction between children and adults became fewer. The separation between the experiences of children and those of adults was the result in the main of the development of the nuclear family as a social institution committed to child-rearing. The concept of this type of exclusive family in which parents and children live under one roof, keeping other blood relatives as well as the rest of the community at a considerable distance was largely unknown before the 19th century and can be said, in a sense, to be "the invention" of the Victorian middle class.

The virtues of "hearth and home" began in nineteenth century popular literature to be idealized in an entirely

new way. The main focus was on the mother's relationship with her children, and this relationship was sentimentalized and intensified to an extraordinary degree. Victorian popular fiction, particularly that which was written to cater to the newly-created market of child-readers, is full of lugubrious scenes involving mothers and children. Mrs. Henry Wood's East Lynne, which probably has the distinction of being the most wept-over novel ever written, turns entirely on a mother being prevented from acknowledging her own child and culminates, in the stage version, with the famous cry, "Dead! Dead! and never called me mother!" It is interesting to note that this sentimentalizing of the relationship between middle-class mothers and children took place at a time when such mothers were able to call upon numerous servants to perform many of the more tedious child-rearing tasks. While the popular image of the remote Victorian mother who delegated all child-rearing functions to servants, nurses and governesses was probably true only of the very wealthy, the middle-class mother of the nineteenth century, because of the cheapness and availability of servants, had many child-care personnel at her disposal.

A glance at our own culture reveals that we are making only a very slow recovery from the Victorians' gross sentimentalization of the mother-child relationship. Clearly one of the reasons behind the promotion of the emotional

and moral value of the relationship between mother and child at such a very intense level has been to support the whole notion of the nuclear family as an institution for child-rearing. The more emotional content which can be poured into the child-rearing function, the more important it becomes that the nuclear family is retained in its present form.

It seems, however, that part of the reason why so much sentiment was invested in the mother-child relationship in the nineteenth century was because of the way in which the "taboo on tenderness" was enforced at that time. This taboo, which remains in active operation in our own time, restricts the expression of tenderness between individuals to very limited situations. A mother may show tenderness with her children and, to a very much lesser extent, tenderness is permissible between lovers, though even here it is often greeted with responses ranging from a teasing mockery to overt aggression. The rigidity with which this taboo is enforced, preventing all but the most limited expressions of tenderness in most relations between adults has meant that tender feelings have had to be channelled almost exclusively into the mother-child relationship.

One of the most dramatic results of this cultural over-investment in the mother-child relationship at the

expense of all other relationships between adults and children, adults and adults, and children and children, has been to make mothers who see child-rearing as their prime (if not their exclusive) function, feel guilty and anxious about almost anything they do or do not do in relation to their children. In a piece in the New York Times, the British novelist Margaret Drabble looked back with both nostalgia and horror to the time when her children were very young:

. . . looking back, I wonder how I endured it On the most profound level, once one has had children one can never be carefree again; each pleasure is snatched from the grave. They are hostages to fortune. I used to be a care-less and adventurous person, before I had children; now I am morbidly obsessed with seat belts and constantly afraid that low-flying aircraft will drop on my children's school.¹⁰

It is all too evident from the level of real anxiety in statements such as this that the over-intensification of tender-

ness in the mother-child relationship, besides limiting other social relationships, can do little to benefit either mothers or children.

While the notion of a prolonged and vulnerable childhood, coupled with the pouring into the mother-child relationship of so many of the feelings which are suppressed elsewhere, may never have been "invented" as a deliberate conspiracy to oppress and manipulate women and children, the effect remains nevertheless disastrous. In particular, the manner in which tender feelings are so intensified in the mother-child relationship but tabooed elsewhere has resulted in women (whether or not they are mothers) and children inhabiting a cultural and emotional ghetto. Barred from economic and political power, isolated from the mainstream of culture, they become receptacles for the fantasies and projections of the middle-class males who inhabit the culturally visible portion of the society. The result is a "rear-view mirror" society which satisfies neither men, women nor children and which sacrifices human potential for the sake of out-moded and ill-founded cultural stereotypes.

FOOTNOTES

1. The Dialectic of Sex (New York, 1970), pp. 81-118.
2. Centuries of Childhood, trans. Robert Baldick (New York, 1962).
3. Ariès, pp. 261-267.
4. Ariès, p. 58.
5. See Paul Goodman, Growing Up Absurd (New York, 1956), p. 13 and Edgar Z. Friedenberg, The Vanishing Adolescent (Boston, 1959), pp. 125-126.
6. Quoted in Steven Marcus, The Other Victorians (New York, 1964), pp. 31-32. The only widely available edition of Acton's book is a substantially abridged one (William Acton, Prostitution, ed. Peter Fryer, London, 1968), which omits this section. Despite its brevity, Fryer's edition gives a similarly clear impression of Acton's fears of sexual excess.
7. Marcus, p. 30.
8. Charles Terrot, Traffic in Innocents (New York, 1960), pp. 123, 149-151, 172-173. This book, like many others on the subject, takes a highly emotional stance. Nevertheless, it provides much accurate factual detail.
9. See Stuart Dodgson Collingwood, The Life and Letters of Lewis Carroll (London, 1898) and Helmut Gernsheim, Lewis Carroll Photographer (London, 1949).
10. Quoted in John Holt, Escape from Childhood: The Needs and Rights of Children (New York, 1974), p. 68.