Socialising the Child in Late Medieval England, c. 1400-1600

Socialising the child explores the role of the household and school in socialising the children of the gentry and the middle ranks of urban society between 1400 and 1600, outlining how childhood was imagined by writers and educators, and how it was presented to child and adult readers in the 15th and 16th centuries. By exploring the centuries before and after 1500 Bailey follows in the footsteps of Judith Bennett and Marjorie McIntosh, whose scholarship has done much to enable historians of women to rethink notions of continuity and change across the late medieval and early modern divide, although she approaches the period from a different angle to these social historians.(1) The primary aim of her book is to explore how late medieval and early modern people wanted and expected children to behave, so whereas Bennett and McIntosh turned to the provincial and metropolitan records of guilds and parishes to explore the everyday experiences of women, Bailey instead examines an impressive array of courtesy poems, didactic tracts, instructional manuals, and educational books in both manuscript and print form, as well as Elizabethan grammar school statutes and account books. Throughout her book Bailey compares variations between manuscripts, and the introduction contains a useful discussion of the historiographies of medieval language, manuscripts and early print culture. Few historians will be surprised to discover that many of these sources focus on the upbringing of male youths under the age of 15, and Bailey uses this imbalance in the literature to highlight differences in focus as to how male and female children were to be raised, noting that most conduct literature for girls consisted of translations of mainland European sources which were conservative in tone.

Chapter one focuses on medieval courtesy poems. Written in English, courtesy poems were owned primarily by merchants and gentry, and their main audience were the male youths who served in the households of the

nobility. Courtesy poems provided guidelines for male youths as to how to obtain a place as a servant in the household of a noble by teaching them how to mimic the behaviour of elite householders, promoting the cultivation of abstract qualities as well as the acquisition of practical attributes. The development of these traits was linked to broader questions about how boys from the upper echelons of medieval society were to develop strong aristocratic identities, and the poems make frequent reference to warfare, violence, humour and chivalry, as well as to more gentle traits such as meekness, piety, chastity, courtesy, and good table manners. With two exceptions the poems Bailey examines emphasise the importance of self-monitoring when addressing young male readers, who were expected to be responsible for their own socialisation, but such poems also assumed that male youths would be in need of appropriate information, provided by an experienced adult in the form of the narrator or author.

Whereas the first substantive chapter of the book focuses on traditional medieval society, chapter two offers a comparison of courtesy literature before and after 1500. As Bailey notes, the period from 1450 to 1550 witnessed numerous changes to the structure and power of the English elite, including a shrinking peerage, the emergence of a more powerful court, and the growth in political and social significance of the gentry. Courtesy literature developed to suit the needs of what Bailey regards as an increasingly important gentry and bourgeoisie, arguing that such texts began to resist the older values of courtesy and chivalry outlined in the previous chapter. During this period of transition the courtesy literature began to display concerns about the dress and appropriate behaviour of young males beyond the household. Some texts were structured around a narrative of the day, beginning with rising in the morning, washing and breakfast, before progressing to labour or attendance at school. During breakfast moderation and safe eating were emphasised, and the stress on schooling is indicated by the inclusion of tables of numbers in English and French. This period also witnessed the development of an urban bourgeois literature for girls based on mother-daughter narratives, highlighting the importance of church attendance, appropriate dress, and care in courtship, as well as expressing concerns about allowing girls and young women to drink alcohol and sell goods at market. Bailey notes that the literature aimed at female youths was characterised by an emphasis on the fear of shame, with especial attention paid to gesture and the need for girls to have constant companions in order to prevent them getting into trouble.

Chapter three changes tack to examine the role of printers in developing readers' choices with regard to courtesy literature. Bailey examines six incunabula printed between 1476 and 1487, arguing that the primary readers of such texts were an urban bourgeoisie of merchants and wealthy craftsmen, and that such individuals not only consumed, but also promoted, supplied and encouraged the publication of texts. The chapter begins with an extensive and well-informed discussion of the materiality of print. Some publications were adaptations and translations of works from mainland Europe, but prologues were used to emphasise an English context and ideology. Multiple poems were printed together in one binding, and consumers could choose to bind together different items. Woodcuts were used to reinforce the concept of a message aimed at youths, although such visual aids also suggest a family unit readership. Bailey argues that the introduction of printed texts coincided with a shift away from a focus on the elite household to a London setting, and from a concern with noble patronage to general sponsorship and the market. Early printed texts displayed a concern with over-courtesy and false behaviour, leading greater emphasis to be placed on the cultivation of inward morality as opposed to outward forms of social behaviour which might be unreliable guides to the true character of an individual. In terms of the behaviour of female youths the literature promoted a sanitised female identity which emphasised the importance for women of chastity, purity, observance of hierarchy, and obedience to fathers and husbands, as well as physical perfection, beauty, and appropriate dress. Printed texts thus articulated messages which were applicable to the middling levels of society as much as to the nobility and aristocracy, and Bailey argues that the works printed by Caxton displayed a particular concern about metropolitan youths. Such works also offered advice to adult householders with regard to topics such as servant management, emphasising the importance of the parental role in parent-child relationships, although (whilst mutual obligations between parents and children were considered important) the primary argument was that children were responsible for their own actions and salvation.

According to Bailey print led to diversification in how socialisation was articulated. By the 16th century

writers of conduct literature were emphasising the importance of familial relationships, primarily those between parents and children within the patriarchal household, in inculcating morality and virtue into young people, both female and male. Moreover it was the smaller non-elite kin-based household family which dominated the literature. Building on these findings, chapter four explores the commercial reasons for book production, the reading locations which books described and anticipated, and representation of socialising patterns. As mentioned previously, English printed books tended to contain translations and reproductions of mainland European texts, and although some humanists emphasised the need for young women to be literate, for the most part such texts promoted conservative attitudes to women, such as an emphasis on women's household skills as nurses and chaperones, and the notion of the household as a safe environment for girls and young women. Indeed, men were largely absent from the socialising strategies of girls, who were expected to emulate their mistresses, whilst avoiding the company of servants. As such the process of socialisation was not seen as being purely the duty of parents, but also as the responsibility of dames and guardians.

Whilst chapter four has much to say about the socialisation of young women, chapter five shifts the focus back on to male youths by examining 16th-century schools. In post-Reformation England schoolmasters were held up as moral exemplars, and the growth in the market for education led to increasing monitoring of schools across the 16th century. One of Bailey's main arguments is that schools were intended to fit children for adulthood and service in the Elizabethan state. As public and civic spaces, similar in layout and adapted from medieval halls, grammar schools acted as inculcators of sociability, courtesy, virtue and religion, as well as monitoring the hygiene and dress of pupils. The social diversity within 16th-century grammar schools was reflected in the roles which specific sorts of children were expected to fulfil within such institutions; for example, in London schools poor scholars were to be trained up to be apprentices, whilst at Almondbury they were asked to gather moss for the school roof and clean desks. Bailey also draws attention to contemporary concerns about the behaviour of pupils outside the school walls, in particular in the liminal space of the street and in the boarding houses in which some pupils lodged. Advice about appropriate behaviour offered to scholars who were boarded out displays evidence of educators seeking to extend their influence into the domestic sphere.

Overall Bailey argues for a mixture of continuity and change across the period from 1400 to 1600. The importance of obedience, duty and meekness were constant refrains within the literature, but cyclical patterns can be discerned too, such as the decline and re-emergence of courtesy. Courtesy poems focused on elite households as the primary location for socialisation, but the ideas contained within such texts circulated amongst and came to appeal to a wider urban bourgeois audience. As this audience grew in importance as a body of consumers the texts themselves were modified to increase their appeal to these social groups, with the increasing depiction of an interiorised, domestic, patriarchal household as the primary forum for socialisation. These shifts were accompanied by the growth of new technologies of production. Publishers showed awareness of what sold, and of what had a market, and books came to address parents rather than children, but Bailey argues that the role of print has been overplayed, and that its main contribution was to increase the number of texts in circulation. Moreover the extent of change varied between texts aimed at young women and those directed at male youths, with greater continuities in the literature aimed at girls, in particular a continued emphasis on passivity and chastity. By 1600 schools and the Church were acting as forums in which good Elizabethans were created, with the importance of education for both sexes being emphasised.

Socialising the Child makes a number of significant contributions to the existing historiography. By arguing that the creation of an adult male identity involved the cultivation of different, often conflicting traits, Bailey's work should be read alongside that of Ruth Mazo Karras, who has argued for the importance of chivalry as the bedrock of adult male identity at the upper levels of late medieval European society, but whose account of the formation of medieval male identities differs from that of Bailey in other respects.(2) Bailey also argues for the importance of connections across the 15th and 16th centuries, especially in the period from 1450 to 1550, following trends in the current historiography of the later middle ages which see this period as an important age of transition between the medieval and the early modern.(3) However, given

that her chronology is virtually identical to that chosen by Eamon Duffy in his groundbreaking *The Stripping of the Altars*, it was surprising to find so little mention of the Reformation.(4) With the exception of a reference to the work of Thomas Salter, in which he recommended that good Protestant women read *Acts and Monuments*, there is little sense that this was a period which witnessed the destruction of a religious system which had taken the best part of a millennium to construct. If the texts have little or nothing to say about religion this in itself is a striking feature which deserved to be emphasised. Yet to end on a critical note would be unfair for this is a well-researched and thoughtfully argued monograph which I hope receives significant attention from social and cultural historians of late medieval and early modern England.

Notes

1. J. M. Bennett, *Ale, Beer and Brewsters: Women's Work in a Changing World, 1300–1700* (Oxford, 1996); M. K. McIntosh, *Working Women in England, 1300–1620* (Cambridge, 2005)Back to (1)
2. R. M. Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia, PN, 2003), chapter 2.Back to (2)
3. For further examples see the works by Bennett and McIntosh cited above, as well as A. Wood, *The 1549 Rebellions and the Making of Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2007) and C. Dyer, *A Country Merchant, 1495–1520: Trading and Farming at the End of the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2012). The ongoing work of Dr Justin Colson on the London Livery Companies will mark a further contribution to our understanding of this liminal period.Back to (3)
4. E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c.1400–1580* (London, 1992). Back to (4)

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