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Entertaining yet Erudite Social History

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Texts and Teaching: Books Recommended for Courses

Entertaining yet Erudite Social History

Barbara A. Hanawalt. *Growing Up in Medieval London: The Experience of Childhood in History*. New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993. 300 pages. \$18.95.

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In Growing Up in Medieval London: The Experience of Childhood in History, Barbara A. Hanawalt tackles the difficult yet intriguing history of childhood in the busy urban environment of London. She takes on a topic that, along with that of the history of women and the poor, has not been adequately dealt with because it has been deemed unimportant or simply too difficult. While a few other works on the topic of medieval youth have been published since Hanawalt's, this topic continues to be elusive and the historiographical gap remains. Two collections of essays, one edited by P.J.P. Goldberg and Felicity Riddy entitled *Youth in the Middle Ages* (2004), and another called *Childhood in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: the Results of a Paradigm Shift in the History of Mentality* (2005), edited by Albrecht Classen, deal with a wide range of topics from medieval motherhood to the Jewish concept of childhood. While they make an effort to analyze the larger picture through different aspects of youth, however, they make no comprehensive attempt to deal with them as Hanawalt has in the form of a monograph. The *lacunae* in medieval sources mean that we have a difficult time seeing a comprehensive picture.

Hanawalt, therefore, recognizes that she must use a myriad of sources in novel and unexpected ways to ferret out the history of medieval London youth.

She writes this social history by filling in the proverbial blanks. Where social history lacks narrative, Hanawalt provides it by creating vignettes using composite information. Historical “purists” and those preferring their history in more “concrete” event-based form will have some difficulty with this approach, as I have discovered in my classes. I have used this work in my History of Medieval England class for a number of years. Overall, about 95% of my students enjoy this book and the social historical approach in general. However, in each class there are a few students who challenge a historian’s “right” to add detail, or to fill in the unfortunate and copious blanks. Hanawalt seems unconcerned with the criticisms that these purists make, writing that these narratives “redress an imbalance in the records” (p. ix).

On the other hand, students delight in Hanawalt’s use of her sources, which include wills, letter books, poems, advice books, city ordinances, court records and wardship accounts, and her trademark coroner’s records. This use of varied sources, qualitative and quantitative, is certainly one of the strengths of the work. They allow students to experience what it might have been like to live as a youth in fourteenth-century London. Furthermore, the informal and highly personable nature of the material, particularly of the coroner’s records, gives them information about the daily lives of people about whom no one much cared. Because a coroner’s inquest was performed in the case of unnatural death in medieval London, the records contain information about the mundane activities in the lives and deaths of these people. Students feel a connection to the person who died from a fall from a solar, the child who drowned in the river, or the person who fell to his death through the rotten floorboards of the outhouse! The personality of this information, therefore, evokes sympathy, and even humor, in the reader. They feel as if they “know” the victim, or could have experienced the same fate.

Students especially appreciate this personal and evocative approach compared to certain other types of history they read. I also assign works with other methodological approaches, such as political and economic, which the majority of my students find much less entertaining and readable. For example, when they read Christine Carpenter's *The War of the Roses: Politics and the Constitution in England c. 1437-1509* (1997), a much denser, traditional, and to many students, difficult read, they find it highly impersonal and connect with it very little if at all. Those students, however, who find Hanawalt's historical methods to be too "soft" appreciate the concrete, event-based history that Carpenter's work offers, and they considered it to be less contrived.

The work follows the life stages of childhood and adolescence throughout medieval London as dwellers progressed from "wild and wanton" to "sad and wise." She addresses the various mechanisms for delimiting these stages, from biological to social. For girls, the liminal event may well have been marriage, whereas for boys it may hinge on the completion of an apprenticeship contract or a guild membership. For her argument that medieval youth did travel through distinct stages, Hanawalt argues against Philippe Ariès's *Centuries of Childhood* (1962). Ariès argued that, based on medieval illustrations, children had no distinguishable childhood, but were rather seen as "miniature adults." He concluded that the child and adolescent, and the love and sentiment that we have for them, are modern notions. Hanawalt illustrates through careful consideration of medieval mentality the question of liminality, ceremonies, expectations, and parameters, that then as now, adolescents desired to establish personal identity and independence, while adults wished to direct, train, and control their behavior (p. 11).

There was, according to Hanawalt, no full-fledged "youth culture" in the Middle Ages where peers were the chief influence on their lives, and where they controlled their own wages and leisure time. This claim may be considered a weakness of the work, since she gives numerous examples of times when adolescents began to distinguish themselves from adults by

becoming more involved in games and other role-playing activities. Adolescents began moving away from childhood games to play games that involved more violence, such as sword play. Hanawalt, however, points out that these games mimicked adult activity, providing evidence that they were not necessarily creating their own subculture in London. London did provide great temptation to youth, which apprenticeship contracts attempted to counteract by setting limits on gaming, drinking, consorting with prostitutes and spending money (p. 115). For many of my students, these activities do indeed seem to suggest a “youth culture.”

Students feel very strongly about the presence of a distinct youth culture, in part because they feel as if there are similarities between the experiences of these medieval adolescents and their own. Particularly, they argue that their distinct youth customs, fashion, music, and activities, parallel the games and riots of medieval youth. One student pointed out that today’s “tweens”—children between nine and twelve years of age—do not fit Hanawalt’s definition of having a distinct youth culture, which includes complete control over time and money, and yet it is undeniable that one exists for them. Advertisers market to this particular demographic despite the fact that they do not earn any money, and they have distinct fashion trends, music, games and activities, just as medieval youths did.

Hanawalt uses a confluence of sociology and anthropology, but has not, as she points out, let the categories within these disciplines restrict her material or her arguments. She follows youth from birth through childhood, education and training, adolescence, apprenticeship, and service, and finally, the entrance into adulthood. Using Victor Turner’s concept of liminality and his “binary discriminations,” Hanawalt illustrates the male rituals and rights of passage demarcating adolescence and adulthood. However, for females, she argues, we do not see the easy opposition of this binary system. The binaries of domestic and public space, for example, are less significant for females because they changed only by degree during their lifetime. Young women

moved from one domestic space to another by marrying, which was attached to biological puberty, or by becoming apprentices or servants, part of social puberty. Like boys, therefore, girls could experience this period of social transition, but unlike boys, their space was primarily domestic, not the city streets or markets (p. 12).

The book deals also with apprenticeship and service as vehicles for adults to direct and train youth in craft and social skills alike. The vertical and horizontal ties of the relationship between apprentice and master and those of the guild were vital to the survival and maturing of youth in London without a family structure. Girls could occasionally apprentice, but were often part of long-term service contracts during their adolescence. Hanawalt also addresses what could happen to youth in London in the absence of these ties, including abuse, both physical and financial, and death. For “orphans,” those children without the benefit of paternal, legal protection, circumstances could be dire. Control of wardship was a major financial advantage, and orphans, especially girls, could be forced to marry, or worse. City laws legislated that no one who could potentially benefit from a ward’s death could be given custody (p. 95).

The chapters on apprenticeship provide strong evidence for Hanawalt’s claim that youths had no control over their time or money. Apprentices entered contracts between fourteen and eighteen years old and spent from seven to ten, or more, years in this intermediate stage between childhood and adulthood (p. 129). They were thus prolonging adolescence while living within a quasi-familial environment. The apprenticeship was a privileged position usually offered to young men and women who came from outside London and it provided potential for wealth, security and increased status. Apprenticeship was a major way of assimilating the large numbers of country or market-town youth into London’s skilled labor force (p. 171). It created horizontal ties extending across crafts and status groups. Apprentices were able to experience the thresholds of the changes of life stages by undergoing ceremonies and rituals not unlike marriage. The guild

and city government both had initiation rituals, including an oath-taking ceremony and the wearing of the livery, special clothing that guild members wore for ceremonial meetings.

Service was another phase in the life cycle that moved the adolescent from the natal home to that of the master so that they could learn skills, accumulate capital, especially for a dowry, and perhaps eventually emerge ready to occupy adult roles (p. 13). In this way, service was analogous to apprenticeship. Both acted to extend adolescence. However, some servants never emerged into these adult roles, and they would never meet the requirement of those roles or life stages. Within these new domestic spaces and roles, servants also experienced a quasi-parental relationship as well as a quasi-sibling relationship with other servants, although they did not necessarily live in the home in which they worked. In this way we see similar vertical and horizontal ties, albeit more intimate.

Parents in London often placed their children directly into service, or wardship arrangements could turn into a service contract with the master as guardian (p. 175). The length of the contract varied but could extend from early teens to early adulthood for those who did move on. The master was responsible for the protection of his servants, as well as for their behavior. Male servants and journeymen, day laborers who had passed the guild test for mastery of the craft but who were too poor to become masters, were prone to organize against their masters to force higher wages and were considered a dangerous group by London adults because they had been detained in the adolescent stage beyond a reasonable age (p. 196). Some guilds divided their members into two groups: those with livery and those without. Hanawalt makes a convincing argument that the subordinate journeymen guild membership forms a useful way in which to examine the markers of exit from adolescence. These young men were caught in an intermediate category, a limbo between childhood and adulthood. My students also occasionally feel this way, noting that the university experience also acts to prolong

adolescence, and is an intermediate period before they must become “real” adults.

These sections on apprenticeship and service, therefore, go a long way toward answering Hanawalt’s overarching question, that of whether medieval people marked the “coming of age,” becoming an adult. Clearly the answer then, as now, was not a simple one. But as Hanawalt illustrates, there are certainly events, markers, and rituals that allowed people to claim adult status. Gender, wealth, social status, occupation, length of apprenticeship, as well as conditions of disease and other variations affected the move to adulthood. As apprenticeship contracts and journeyman status lengthened during the era after the Black Death when labor was scarce, and as the age of inheritance for men kept creeping up in the fifteenth century, the recognition of adulthood became later and more elusive. Marriage for women, inheritance, and guild membership did, however, allow many London youth to become “sad and wise.”

I have only used this book in my upper division history class, and I think that it is particularly useful at that level. Students in an introductory western civilization class would probably enjoy the information and the examples, although the methodological intricacies may be lost on them. Instructors of medieval and early modern literature courses also would find Hanawalt’s book a useful source of information for presenting “context” for works like *Canterbury Tales* and *Romeo and Juliet*, and for examples of how literary works can be used as historical source material. Yet I would not recommend its adoption for such a course. While it contains parts of many medieval literary works, it is specifically intended as an historical analysis and narrative. The work lends itself well to class discussions about its arguments, methods and sources. Students can also debate the “purist” versus synthetic approach to this kind of history. I have used it in small groups in which I give each an “age” or life stage to debate and then to present to the class. In large group discussions students often seem to want to discuss the abstract notion of “feeling” like an adult, then and now.

Of all the works that I have my students discuss, this one seems to elicit the most willing participation; agree or disagree with Hanawalt, everyone has an opinion they are willing to share. In addition, this work can be used to assign book reviews and papers about methodology, pointing out the other approaches to history. For example, I have had the students write essays comparing Hanawalt's approach to apprenticeship or service with a quantitative economic work, or a feminist history. This assignment assesses their ability to distinguish the benefits and limitations of each kind of approach, method and historiography, and their ability to note the potential for each type. I have been extremely successful in teaching this text, and would recommend it to others who want their students to be exposed to a novel approach to medieval history.

This work is an extraordinarily useful one for teaching socio-economic history of the Middle Ages and specifically of England. It is also useful for teaching about methodology. The paradigm shift in the 1970s that made social, children's and women's history respectable topics meant that those historians who undertook these tasks had to engage new methodologies and historiographies in order to do so. As Hanawalt points out, her methodology is a synthetic one through which she is able to achieve a coherent and fluid narrative where others have not. The imaginative vignettes act as the glue that binds her uneven information together. They are also what set this work apart and places it in the ranks entertaining yet erudite social history.

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