The History of Children’s Literature

From Moral Fables to the Turn of Romanticism
The ‘invention’ of childhood

- The first author to speak of the ‘invention of childhood’ is French historian Philippe Ariès in *L’Enfant et la vie familiale sous l’Ancien Régime* (1960).

- *transl. into Italian as Padri e Figli nell’Europa medievale e moderna* (1960) *and into English as Centuries of Childhood* (1962)
The ‘Invention’ of Childhood

- Ariès used the representation of children in the visual arts in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance

- The portraits of children are used as evidence of the fact that, before the 16th century, there was no interest in ‘childhood’ as a specific category
The Middle Ages

- Only few children feature in works of art
- The only exception is baby Jesus

The baby is unnaturally standing, stiff posture
The Renaissance

- There are more children, but they are ‘miniature adults’

‘Elizabethan Family at dinner’
Why were there no children in art?

- For many years, art historians accounted for the fact that portraits of children were embarrassingly unrealistic by suggesting that painters lacked the skill to paint children.

- For Ariès, they simply did not ‘see’ ‘children’, but ‘little adults’.
Children of the Medici Family

Agnolo Bronzino, portrait of Cosimo de’ Medici’s daughter (1549) and of Giovanni de’ Medici

The children are displaying the power of the family to which they belong
The 19th century

The little girls are still rather odd-looking, BUT their dress makes it clear that children are no longer considered as little adults.

Susan C. Waters, The Lincoln Children (1845)
The 19th Century

Childish attitude, posture, and expression

William Ruthen Wheeler, Portrait of two children, Helen and Alice Capron (1863)
Children and adults after the 19th C

Renoir, Children at the Seashore (1883)

Renoir, Madame Carpenter and her children (1878)
Children and adults after the 19th C

Giovanni Spadini, Mamma con bambini (ca 1920)
Children’s Literature Before the Nineteenth Century

- Today we take for granted that children’s books have to fulfil the double goal of providing *amusement* + *moral message*
Amusement + moral message

... And sometimes we don’t even have a moral message!

Roald Dahl, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory
(1964)
Instruction and Delight?

- Until the middle of the 19th century, ‘instruction’ predominated over delight.

- “Courtesy books” = instructing children on proper social behaviour
Instruction and Delight

*John Comenius*, Orbis Sensualium Pictus (1657)
(‘A world of things obvious to the senses’ (1659))

German/Latin textbook for schooling
John Locke (1632-1704), Some Thoughts concerning education (1693):

• The minds of young children are like blank slates (tabula rasa), waiting to be written on and instructed.

• Fairy stories = “Perfectly useless trumpery”

• Aesop’s Fables the only imaginative work fit for children
What books for children before the 19thC?

- Aesop’s *Fables*
- Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719)
- Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) (abridged)
- John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678)
the Enlightenment

○ children’s education = fundamental to the development of the young man

○ ‘delight’ only used to sugar the large pills of instruction that children were supposed to swallow

○ children’s books between the 1740s and the 1820s = sternly moral
One exception: Rousseau

- Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)
- *Emile* (1762)
- Need to encourage the moral development of children
  - (as opposed to spiritual and intellectual)
- BUT: encouraged emphasis on moral tales
Educationalists

- Strongly moral emphasis
- Mrs Trimmer on Cinderella: “The terrific image which tales of this nature present to the imagination, usually make deep impressions, and injure the tender minds of children, by exciting unreasonable and groundless fears. Neither do the generality of tales of this kind supply any moral instruction level to the infantine capacity”.

The Romantic Turn

- Schelling and NatürPhilosophie: primary (=natural, childlike) imagination vs secondary (=artificial) imagination

- William Blake: Songs of Innocence (1789): children have access to a kind of visionary simplicity denied to adults
The Romantic Turn

- William Wordsworth, Lyrical Ballads (1798)
- *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*
- *Children’s imagination = superior, something that is lost when growing up*
Ode: Intimations of Immortality

THERE was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,

   The earth, and every common sight,

   To me did seem

Apparell'd in celestial light,

The glory and the freshness of a dream.

It is not now as it hath been of yore;—

   Turn wheresoe'er I may,

   By night or day,

The things which I have seen I now can see no more.
Ode: Intimations of Immortality

“Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy”
Wordsworth, “We are seven”

‘Two of us in the church-yard lie,
My sister and my brother;
And, in the church-yard cottage, I
Dwell near them with my mother.’

‘You say that two at Conway dwell,
And two are gone to sea,
Yet ye are seven!—I pray you tell,
Sweet Maid, how this may be.’

Then did the little Maid reply,
‘Seven boys and girls are we;
Two of us in the church-yard lie,
Beneath the church-yard tree.’
The Romantic turn

- Did not stop the success of moral and cautionary tales (=children punished for misbehaviour)
- BUT new emphasis on children’s imagination
The ‘invention’ of childhood

- If we consider the ‘invention of childhood’ simply from the perspective of education, then it starts BEFORE the 19th C (eg Locke, Rousseau)

- What is new in the 19th century, with the ‘Romantic turn’, is the interest in children’s IMAGINATION
The Romantic turn

- It is not the child that has to be socialized into the world of the educator, but the other way round.
- The child is gifted with a special, active and truly authentic power of imagination.
- The child as poet, ‘intimations of immortality’.
Moral tales in the 19th C

- Moral tales continued to exist also in the 19th C (also called ‘cautionary tales’)
- Only, children were now recognized as possessing a specially clear vision of the world
- Need to STIMULATE but also CONTROL children’s imagination and fantasy
ELLEN,

or

The Naughty Girl Reclaimed.

Ellen makes her First Appearance in a
White Gown, with a Book at her Feet.

This little girl, whom now you see,
To mind mamma will not agree,
And though her face is fair and mild,
You view a stubborn, naughty child;—
Nay, Ellen is so wayward grown,
Her book upon the ground is thrown,
And kind mamma, who loves so well,
Can neither make her read or spell:
Imagination

- New emphasis on the special imagination of children
- Different from previous stories, eg Henry Fielding’s Tom Jones (1749), Picaresque story