

The ages of the child

Michael Plastow¹

Our modern notion of the child emerged in the decline of the Middle Ages, and the privileged place that the child occupies in the family is quite recent. My thesis here is that the modern “sentiment of childhood”² described by the historian Philippe Ariès, has come about through the repression of both infantile sexuality and mortality: sex and death being the two great enigmas according to Freud. By examining this “silent history”³ of the child, we might endeavour to locate the lost discourses of childhood.

In Apollodorus’ account, the riddle of Theban Sphinx was the following: “What is it that has one name that is four-footed, two-footed, and three-footed?”⁴ No Theban had been able to find the answer and, in despair, the regent Creon offered both the throne and his sister Jocasta to anyone who could do so. Oedipus was the only one to successfully answer the question. His reply was, “Man is the answer: for as an infant he goes upon four feet; in his prime upon two; and in old age he takes a stick as a third foot”⁵.

Oedipus gave the correct answer, at least the answer that the Other determined was right. The Sphinx, however, is the bearer of the enigma of sexuality. Oedipus’ answer was given in developmental terms and conveyed a generalised knowledge, which at the same time left him in complete ignorance of his singular truth. His answer, even if it saved his skin in the short-term, was at the same time a turning away from the riddle of sexuality and death: it let out the baby—what Freud came to designate as the *infantile*—with the bathwater. If the notion of the infantile—the infant’s relation to sex and death—is not elaborated, we end up with the *child*, that is, a developmental being: a minor. Furthermore, from Oedipus’ response, it is evident that the developmental model is an age-old one, not a recent scientific invention.

The *child* does not permit of any clear definition: for the law, for clinical services, and for society, what we consider to be a child is subject to differing notions and age ranges. These ages and stages are also elastic according to political and other influences. For instance, the group defined as *infants* has been separated out from child psychiatry to form a relatively new field known as *infant psychiatry*. These terms *infant* and *child* no longer coincide as they did at times in Freud. In English, the term *infant* is derived from the French *enfant*, which retains the wider sense of *child*.

At the other end of the age spectrum of childhood, some of our child and adolescent mental health services are being extended out from an upper age of eighteen, previously considered to be the limit of childhood and adolescence, to now encompass *young people* or *youth* up to the age of twenty-five. Moreover, it is a social reality that the period during which children continue to live with their parents is becoming more and more prolonged. The Australian Bureau of Statistics, for instance, discerned that in 1986, nineteen per cent of young people aged between twenty to thirty-four were living with their parents, whereas twenty years later, in 2006, the figure had risen to twenty-three per cent.⁶

Ariès describes adolescence, as we have come to know it, as a relatively recent phenomenon, with the prototype being Wagner's *Siegfried*. At the end of the nineteenth century, the music of *Siegfried* expressed for the very first time a mixture of provisional purity, physical force, spontaneity and joy of life that was to make the adolescent the hero of the following century. Adolescence gained its strength and became a generalised phenomenon in all countries that participated in the Great War. Ariès remarks that young people who returned from the Great War opposed the old guard *en masse*, following the debacle into which they had been led by the previous generations. Adolescence, he writes, was "the favourite age".⁷ But it would seem that in the 21st century, *youth* or *young people* is the favourite age.

Freud, in defence of his daughter Anna's approach, wrote to Joan Riviere that, "Ferenczi wittily remarked that, if Mrs. Klein is right, then children really no longer exist".⁸ Here the reference appears to be Klein's telescoping of the Oedipus complex into the first few months of the infant's life. But whether it is in the first few years of life, or the first few months of life, both of these developmental interpretations can be subsumed under Freud's more structural reference to "Pregenital organizations"⁹ which might pertain to any age. If Ferenczi's anecdote is recounted ironically, it is nonetheless to be taken seriously. Does a *child* exist for psychoanalysis? After all, a child might well be considered to be a *dependent*, but what adult is independent, independent of others, of the Other?

Freud himself in his "Foreword" to August Aichhorn's *Wayward Youth*, places the *child* together with his perverse counterpart in the following way: "The child, even the wayward and delinquent child, should not be compared to the adult neurotic".¹⁰ He writes that, "The child lives on almost unchanged in the sick patient as well as in the dreamer and the artist". It is obvious here that Freud is not referring to "the child" as an age or a stage of development—since this *child* can just as easily be an adult—but rather as a particular psychic structure. For Freud, the position of being a child is one that does not allow psychoanalysis to proceed: "it [psychoanalysis] requires the formation of certain psychic structures".

The ages of Man

From ancient times, and throughout the Middle Ages, life was divided into a number of ages. Such a division into the *Ages of Man* constituted a logic that was universally understood in a way that we no longer comprehend today. According to Ariès: "A man's 'age' was a scientific category of the same order as weight or speed for our contemporaries. It formed part of a system of physical description and explanation which went back to the Ionian philosophers of the sixth century B.C".¹¹

The best known account of these ages, and no doubt the best articulated, is that of Shakespeare in *As You Like it*. We could say that he plays upon the word *stage*, not simply a period of development, but also the setting of life's dramas:

All the world's a stage,
 And all the men and women merely players.
 They have their exits and their entrances,
 And one man in his time plays many parts,

His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
 Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
 And then the whining schoolboy with his satchel
 And shining morning face, creeping like snail
 Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
 Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
 Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
 Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,
 Jealous in honour, sudden, and quick in quarrel,
 Seeking the bubble reputation
 Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,
 In fair round belly with good capon lined,
 With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
 Full of wise saws and modern instances;
 And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
 Into the lean and slippered pantaloone,
 With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
 His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
 For his shrunk shank, and his big, manly voice,
 Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
 And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
 That ends this strange, eventful history,
 Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
 Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.¹²

What is remarkable here is that Shakespeare underlines the fictional character of such a life lived, in which these different developmental stages are mere roles that are played out upon the stage of life. In this rendering, such roles are arbitrary and may be—and are—reassigned according to any particular era. Shakespeare's account of the oblivion of the endpoint of life, the inexorable loss of death in which Man is "sans everything" provides a structural reference point for the fiction of these stages.

Our contemporary understanding of what constitutes a child, and the attribution of childhood as a phase of life distinct from all others, according to Ariès' thesis, is a relatively recent event in the evolution of Western culture. In French, the title of his book translates literally as *The Child and Family Life under the Ancien Régime*¹³, the latter referring to the political regime that was in force in France from the fifteenth century until the time of the Enlightenment.

Ariès' thesis is that in the mediaeval era there was little room for the notion of childhood, at least as we know it. He refers to children in mediaeval art being depicted in exactly the same way as adults, just on a smaller scale. Curiously, some of the first depictions of the small child were representations of the soul leaving the defunct at the moment of death. And elsewhere the angel of their Annunciation delivers to the Virgin Mary a naked child, the soul of Jesus, which also penetrates her body through her mouth. Ariès refers to this moment as "the entry of the soul into the world".¹⁴ One of the words that is used to attempt to circumscribe the notion of the subject is still the ancient Greek word ψυχή, or *psyche*, which means, amongst other things, life, breath and soul. The soul, through the German equivalent *Seele*, was also the means through which Freud spoke of what we are referring to here as the subject.

Ariès refers to an account from the seventeenth century of a neighbour standing at the bedside of a woman who has just given birth, the mother of five “little brats”. The neighbour calms the woman’s fears in the following way: “Before they are old enough to bother you, you will have lost half of them, or perhaps all of them”.¹⁵ Ariès notes that this strikes our contemporary sensibilities as a rather strange consolation. He puts forward that people could not allow themselves to become too attached to something that was regarded as a probable loss. Even in the eighteenth century, specifically in *Émile*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau was able to write, “Of all the children who are born, only a half, at most, come to adolescence; and it is probable that your pupil will not live to be a man”.¹⁶

The apparent insensitivity of ancient Greek and Roman societies—or that of contemporary China—that practise the exposure of children, is offensive to us. We forget that such exposure and infanticide were commonplace in Western nations and were tolerated until the end of the seventeenth century. Ariès proposes that, “A child’s life at that time was considered with the same ambiguity as that of a foetus today, with the difference that infanticide was buried in silence whilst abortion is demanded out aloud”.¹⁷

The Church endeavoured to stamp out these age-old practices by vigorous condemnation, and States attempted to control them by coercive measures. It was for this reason that in the seventeenth century the first institutions for abandoned children were set up, such as the Foundlings’ Hospital (*Hôpital des Enfants Trouvés*) that was established by St Vincent de Paul in 1638.¹⁸ Exposure and infanticide still occur, particularly in countries where termination of pregnancy is illegal. In many European countries there are so-called *baby-boxes* in which it is possible for mothers to anonymously leave unwanted babies where there are facilities to ensure they are safe. This practice began as an effort to combat cases of infanticide or abandonment of unwanted infants. We could also say that termination of pregnancy, as it is practised today, is also the anticipated, modern and surgical mode of infanticide and exposure.

Another modern form of infanticide is that of child abuse, which in many cases leads to death. It is not unusual for a child to be killed by direct blows from its parents or step-parents. Such occurrences are often reported in the media, but each is perceived as an exceptional event. A recent newspaper article in France, reporting upon an investigation which followed all births in a third of France, estimated that there were “400 to 800 homicides of minors each year”.¹⁹ That is, approximately two children per day in France died as a result of parental violence. There is no reason to believe that this is different in other countries.

Rather than understand exposure and infanticide as horrors to be relegated to a forgotten past, we can propose that our society is, in part, based upon these practices. We might forget, for instance, that the practice of exposure and infanticide is an integral part of the myth of Oedipus and that of Moses, both foundational stories that underwrite our culture. Exposure and infanticide in early childhood have not been eliminated, but rather, they have been repressed.

The surplus of love and enjoyment

The construction of the notions of the *child*, the *mother*, the *father* and the *family* are dependent upon the thinking, the contingencies and the prejudices of any particular era, including our own. This, we can say, is also the thesis of Élisabeth Badinter’s book, first published in 1980, entitled

L'Amour en Plus, or *Mother Love*. In this work Badinter disputes the existence of a so-called maternal instinct and demonstrates how the notion of maternal love, as we know it, is a construction of the past two centuries. This, nonetheless, was not a new thesis. In a presentation entitled, "On the basis of mother love", Margarethe Hilferding, the first female member of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society, had already proposed in 1911 that innate maternal love does not exist.²⁰

Badinter also dates the beginnings of our contemporary notion of maternal love to the end of the eighteenth century. She opens her work in the following way:

In 1780, Lieutenant Lenoir of the Paris police noted, not without some bitterness, that only 1,000 of the 21,000 babies born each year in Paris were being breast-fed by their mothers. Another thousand newborns, the children of privileged families, were being breast-fed by live-in wet nurses, while the rest were taken from their mothers and sent to wet nurses outside Paris.²¹

Whilst we might speculate about the long-term effects of these practices, there are some indications of their immediate effects upon the infant. Badinter, for instance, recounts the story of one particular nonchalant wet-nurse, ironically called Marie Bienvenue (*Mary Welcome* in English!), who had 31 infants die in her care within the space of 14 months.²²

For Badinter, love and enjoyment of the infant are hence *en plus*, a surplus to the care of the child.

Infanticide and in-fancy

In speaking about this notion of infanticide, I made a slip of the tongue and said "in-fantasy", rather than "infanticide", condensing infanticide with both infancy and fantasy. The etymology of infant is the Latin *infans*: one who is without speech. And if one is without speech, then one is by necessity spoken for. So what then is the relation between infancy and infanticide? Infancy, can also be written as *in-fancy*, "fancy" being originally a contraction of the word *fantasy*. To take this further, we can propose that the child has an existence as subject only in so far as he or she is fancied by the Other. Thus it is the phantasy of the parents—or the fantasm of the Other—that is the surplus that breathes life into the infant.

The child is accorded a place in society through baptism—the recognition that there is a soul residing in the child—and civil registration. But this recognition of the subject also has to be particularised by the mother and father of the child who have desired it and given it life. It is the mother and father who initially speak for the child. In other words, the child can exist before it is born since it has already been given a name and attributed various ideals and aspirations, and occupies a particular place in the fantasm of each parent, in the speech of the mother and the father. On the other hand, in the absence of being a child *in-fantasy*, the child might never have a true existence, despite the biological fact of its being.

This is the singular means by which the mother and father fancy the child. In this manner the baby can exist *in-fancy* long before it is conceived, and well before it is born. That is, the repressed notion of infanticide is precisely the reverse side of the coin of *in-fancy*. It is this surplus—the *en plus* referred to by Badinter—of the parents' enjoyment of the sexual act by which the child is engendered. This primal scene is followed by a little death, *la petite mort*. These leave an indelible mark of the original sin of sex and death upon the soul of the infant.

Notes

- ¹ Analyst of the School. The Freudian School of Melbourne, School of Lacanian Psychoanalysis.
- ² Ariès, Philippe. *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime*. Paris : Seuil, coll. Points, 1973, 10.
- ³ Ariès, Philippe. *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. Tr. Robert Baldick. London: Jonathan Cape, 1962, 10.
- ⁴ Cited in: Morford, Mark & Lenardon, Robert. *Classical Mythology* (8th edition). New York: Oxford, 2007, 409.
- ⁵ Cited in: Morford, Mark & Lenardon, Robert. *Classical Mythology* (8th edition). New York: Oxford, 2007, 409.
- ⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2009). *Home and Away: The Living Arrangements of Young People*. www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Main+Features50June+2009 (last accessed 23 December 2014).
- ⁷ Ariès, Philippe. *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. Tr. Robert Baldick. London: Jonathan Cape, 1962, 30.
- ⁸ Hughes, Athol. "Letters from Sigmund Freud to Joan Riviere" (1921–1939). *International Review of Psycho-Analysis* 1992, 19: 265–284, 277.
- ⁹ Freud, Sigmund. "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" (1905d). *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. VII. Ed. James Strachey & Anna Freud. Tr. James Strachey. London: Hogarth, 1981, 197.
- ¹⁰ Freud, Sigmund. Foreword. In: August Aichhorn, A. *Wayward Youth*. Fwd. Sigmund Freud. New York: Viking, 1935, v-vii.
- ¹¹ Ariès, Phillippe. *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. Tr. Robert Baldick. London: Jonathan Cape, 1962, 19.
- ¹² Shakespeare, William. *As You Like it*. (1600), Act 2, Scene 7, lines 139-166.
- ¹³ Ariès, Phillippe. *L'Enfant et la Vie Familial sous L'Ancien Régime*. Paris: Seuil, 1973.
- ¹⁴ Ariès, Phillippe. *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. Tr. Robert Baldick. London: Jonathan Cape, 1962, 36.
- ¹⁵ Ariès, Phillippe. *L'Enfant et la Vie Familial sous L'Ancien Régime*. Paris: Seuil, 1973: 38.
- ¹⁶ Rousseau, Jacques. *J. Émile or Treatise on Education*. Ed. William Harris. Tr. William Payne. New York: Appleton, 1896, 44.
- ¹⁷ Ariès, Phillippe. *L'Enfant et la Vie Familial sous L'Ancien Régime*. Paris: Seuil, 1973, 15.
- ¹⁸ Badinter, Élisabeth. *Mother Love: Myth and Reality: Motherhood in Modern History*. Fwd. Francine du Plessix Gray. New York: Macmillan, 1981, 19.
- ¹⁹ Dupont, Gaëlle. Enfants maltraités: deux morts par jour. *Le Monde*, 15 June 2013: 11. Available at: www.lemonde.fr.
- ²⁰ Nunberg, Herman & Federn, Ernst (Eds). *Minutes of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society 1910 -1911* Volume III. New York: International Universities Press, 1974: 112-125.

²¹ Badinter, Élisabeth. *Mother Love: Myth and Reality: Motherhood in Modern History*. Fwd. Francine du Plessix Gray. New York: Macmillan, 1981, xix.

²² Badinter, Élisabeth. *L'Amour en Plus: Histoire de l'Amour Maternel XVIIe-XXe Siècle*. Paris: Flammarion, 1981, 12.