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THE

DISAPPEARANCE

OF

CHILDHOOD



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Chapter I

WHEN THERE WERE NO CHILDREN

As I write, twelve- and thirteen-year-old girls are among the highest-paid models in America. In advertisements in all the visual media, they are presented to the public in the guise of knowing and sexually enticing adults, entirely comfortable in the milieu of eroticism. After seeing such displays of soft core pornography, those of us not yet fully conditioned to the new American attitudes toward children yearn for the charm and seductive innocence of Lolita.

In cities and towns throughout the country the difference between adult crimes and children's crimes is rapidly narrowing; and in many states the punishments are becoming the same. Between 1950 and 1979 the rate of serious crime committed by those younger than fifteen has increased one hundred and ten times, or eleven thousand percent. Old-timers may wonder about what happened to "juvenile delinquency," and grow nostalgic about a time when a teen-ager who cut class to smoke a cigarette in the school lavatory was considered a "problem."

Old-timers will also remember when there existed an important difference between the clothing of children and adults.

Within the past decade the children's clothing industry has undergone such rapid change that for all practical purposes "children's clothing" has disappeared. It would appear that the idea put forward by Erasmus and then fully accepted in the eighteenth century—namely, that children and adults require different forms of dress—is now rejected by both classes of people.

Like distinctive forms of dress, children's games, once so visible on the streets of our towns and cities, are also disappearing. Even the idea of a children's game seems to be slipping from our grasp. A children's game, as we used to think of it, requires no instructors or umpires or spectators; it uses whatever space and equipment are at hand; it is played for no other reason than pleasure. But Little League baseball and Pee Wee football, for example, not only are supervised by adults but are modeled in every possible way on big league sports. Umpires are needed. Equipment is required. Adults cheer and jeer from the sidelines. It is not pleasure the players are seeking but reputation. Who has seen anyone over the age of nine playing Jacks, Johnny on the Pony, Blindman's Buff, or ball-bouncing rhymes? Peter and Iona Opie, the great English historians of children's games, have identified hundreds of traditional children's games, almost none of which are presently played with any regularity by American children. Even Hide-and-Seek, which was played in Periclean Athens more than two thousand years ago, has now almost completely disappeared from the repertoire of self-organized children's amusements.¹ Children's games, in a phrase, are an endangered species.

As, indeed, is childhood itself. Everywhere one looks, it may be seen that the behavior, language, attitudes, and desires—even the physical appearance—of adults and children are becoming increasingly indistinguishable. No doubt this is why there exists a growing movement to recast the legal rights of children so that they are more or less the same as adults'. (See, for example, Richard Farson's book *Birth-*

rights.) The thrust of this movement, which, among other things, is opposed to compulsory schooling, resides in the claim that what has been thought to be a preferred status for children is instead only an oppression that keeps them from fully participating in society.

I will discuss later the evidence supporting the view that childhood is disappearing, but I want to note here that of all such evidence none is more suggestive than the fact that the history of childhood has now become a major industry among scholars. As if to confirm Marshall McLuhan's observation that when a social artifact becomes obsolete, it is turned into an object of nostalgia and contemplation, historians and social critics have produced, within the past two decades, scores of major works on childhood's history, whereas very few were written between, say, 1800 and 1960.² Indeed, it is probably fair to say that Philippe Ariès's *Centuries of Childhood*, published in 1962, created the field and started the rush. Why now? At the very least we may say that the best histories of anything are produced when an event is completed, when a period is waning, when it is unlikely that a new and more robust phase will occur. Historians usually come not to praise but to bury. In any event, they find autopsies easier to do than progress reports.

But even if I am wrong in believing that the sudden preoccupation with recording the history of childhood is, by itself, a sign of the waning of childhood, we can at least be grateful for having available, at long last, accounts of where childhood comes from. Such accounts make it possible for us to learn why an idea like childhood was conceived, and to make conjectures as to why it should become obsolete. What follows, then, is the story of childhood as a careful reader of much of the available material can best piece it together.

Of the attitudes toward children in antiquity, we know very little. The Greeks, for example, paid scant attention to childhood as a special age category, and the old adage that the Greeks had a word for everything does not apply to the con-

cept of a child. Their words for *child* and *youth* are, at the very least, ambiguous, and seem to include almost anyone between infancy and old age. Although none of their paintings have survived, it is unlikely that the Greeks thought it worthwhile to portray children in them. We know, of course, that among their surviving statues, none is of a child.³

There are references in their voluminous literature to what we might call children, but these are clouded by ambiguity, so that one cannot get a sure view of the Greek conception, such as it was, of a child. For example, Xenophon tells of the relationship of a man to his young wife. She is not yet fifteen and has been brought up properly "to see as little, and hear as little, and ask as few questions as possible." But since she also reveals that she has been told by her mother that she is of no consequence and that only her husband matters, we cannot clearly judge if we are learning about the Greek attitude toward females or toward children. We do know that among the Greeks as late as Aristotle's time, there were no moral or legal restraints against the practice of infanticide. Although Aristotle believed there should be limits set upon this ghastly tradition, he raised no strong objections to it.⁴ From this we may assume that the Greek view of the meaning of a child's life was drastically different from our own. But even this assumption fails on occasion. Herodotus tells several stories that suggest an attitude recognizable to the modern mind. In one such story, ten Corinthians go to a house for the purpose of killing a little boy who, according to an oracle, would grow up to destroy their city. When they arrive at the house, the mother, thinking they are making a friendly visit, places the boy in the arms of one of the men. The boy smiles and, as we would say, captures the hearts of the men, who then leave without performing their dreadful mission. It is not clear how old the boy is, but he is obviously young enough to be held in the arms of an adult. Perhaps if he had been as old as eight or nine, the men would have had no trouble in doing what they came for.

One thing, however, is clear enough. Though the Greeks may have been ambivalent, even confused (by our standards), about the nature of childhood, they were single-mindedly passionate about education. The greatest Athenian philosopher, Plato, wrote extensively on the subject, including no less than three different proposals on how the education of youth ought to be conducted. Moreover, some of his most memorable dialogues are discussions of such questions as whether or not virtue and courage can be taught. (He believed they can.) There can be no doubt that the Greeks invented the idea of school. Their word for it meant "leisure," reflecting a characteristic Athenian belief that at leisure a civilized person would naturally spend his time thinking and learning. Even the ferocious Spartans, who were not strong on what their neighbors would call thinking and learning, established schools. According to Plutarch's life of Lycurgus in the *Lives*, the Spartans enrolled seven-year-old males in classes where they did exercises and played together. They also were taught some reading and writing. "Just enough," Plutarch tells us, "to serve their turn."

As for the Athenians, as is well known, they established a great variety of schools, some of which became vehicles for the spread of Greek culture to many parts of the world. There were their gymnasiums, their ephebic colleges, their schools of the rhetor, and even elementary schools, in which reading and arithmetic were taught. And even though the ages of the young scholars—let us say, at elementary school—were more advanced than we might expect (many Greek boys did not learn to read until adolescence), wherever there are schools, there is consciousness, in some degree, of the specialness of the young.

Nonetheless, the Greek preoccupation with school must not be taken to mean that their conception of childhood parallels our own. Even if we exclude the Spartans, whose methods of discipline, for example, would be regarded by the modern mind as torture, the Greeks did not approach the

disciplining of the young with the same measure of empathy and understanding considered normal by moderns. "The evidence which I have collected on methods of disciplining children," notes Lloyd deMause, "leads me to believe that a very large percentage of the children prior to the eighteenth century were what would today be termed 'battered children.'"⁵ Indeed, deMause conjectures that a "hundred generations of mothers" impassively watched their infants and children suffer from one source of discomfort or another because the mothers (and, emphatically, the fathers) lacked the psychic mechanism necessary to empathize with children.⁶ He is probably correct in this conjecture. There are certainly parents living today who do not have the capacity to empathize with children, and this after four hundred years of child-consciousness. It is, therefore, entirely plausible that when Plato speaks in *Protagoras* of straightening disobedient children by "threats and blows, like a piece of warped wood," we may believe that this is a considerably more primitive version of the traditional warning that if we spare the rod, we will spoil the child. We may also believe that for all their schools, and for all their concern to impart virtue to youth, the ancient Greeks would be mystified by the idea of child psychology or, for that matter, child nurturing.

After saying all of this, I think it fair to conclude that the Greeks gave us a foreshadowing of the idea of childhood. As with so many ideas we take for granted as part of a civilized mentality, we are indebted to the Greeks for this contribution. They did not quite invent childhood, but they came close enough so that two thousand years later, when it *was* invented, we were able to recognize its roots.

The Romans, of course, borrowed the Greek notion of schooling and even developed an awareness of childhood that surpassed the Greek idea. Roman art, for example, reveals "a quite extraordinary sense of age, of the young and growing child, which was not to be found again in Western art until Renaissance times."⁷ Moreover, the Romans began to make

a connection, taken for granted by moderns, between the growing child and the idea of shame. This was a crucial step in the evolution of the idea of childhood, and I shall have occasion to refer to this connection in discussing the decline of childhood in both medieval Europe and our own times. The point is, simply, that *without a well-developed idea of shame, childhood cannot exist*. To their everlasting credit, the Romans grasped this point, although, apparently, not all of them and not enough of them. In an extraordinary passage in his discussion of education, Quintilian reproaches his peers for their shame-less behavior in the presence of noble Roman children:

We rejoice if they say something over-free, and words which we should not tolerate from the lips even of an Alexandrian page are greeted with laughter and a kiss. . . . they hear us use such words, they see our mistresses and minions; every dinner party is loud with foul songs, and things are presented to their eyes of which we should blush to speak.⁸

Here we are confronted with an entirely modern view, one that defines childhood, in part, by claiming for it the need to be sheltered from adult secrets, particularly sexual secrets. Quintilian's reproach to adults who neglect to keep these secrets from the young provides a perfect illustration of an attitude that Norbert Elias in his great book *The Civilizing Process* claims as a feature of our civilized culture: that the sexual drive is subjected to strict controls, that great pressure is placed on adults to privatize all their impulses (particularly sexual ones), and that a "conspiracy of silence" concerning sexual urges is maintained in the presence of the young.⁹

Of course, Quintilian was a teacher of oratory and rhetoric, and in the work by which we best know him, he gives an account of how to educate a great orator, beginning in infancy. Thus, we may assume that he was far more advanced

than most of his contemporaries in his sensitivity to the special features of the young. Nonetheless, there is a traceable line between the sentiment expressed by Quintilian and the first known law prohibiting infanticide. That law does not come until A.D. 374, three centuries after Quintilian.¹⁰ But it is an extension of the idea that children require protection and nurturing, and schooling, and freedom from adult secrets.

And then, after the Romans, all such ideas disappear.

Every educated person knows about the invasions of the northern barbarians, the collapse of the Roman empire, the shrouding of classical culture, and Europe's descent into what is called the Dark and then the Middle Ages. Our textbooks cover the transformation well enough except for four points that are often overlooked and that are particularly relevant to the story of childhood. The first is that literacy disappears. The second is that education disappears. The third is that shame disappears. And the fourth, as a consequence of the other three, is that childhood disappears. To understand that consequence, we must examine in some detail the first three developments.

Why literacy should have disappeared is as deep a mystery as any of the unknowns concerning the millennium that spans the fall of Rome and the invention of the printing press. However, the question becomes approachable if put in a form similar to the way it is posed by Eric Havelock in his *Origins of Western Literacy*. "Why . . . after the fall of Rome," he asks, "did it come about that the use of the Roman alphabet contracted to the point where the general population ceased to read and write so that a previous socialized literacy reverted to a condition of virtual craft literacy, once more reversing history?"¹¹ What is so useful about Havelock's question is his distinction between "social literacy" and "craft literacy." By social literacy he means a condition where most people can and do read. By craft literacy he means a condition where the art of reading is restricted to a few who form

a "scribal" and, therefore, a privileged class. In other words, if we define a literate culture not on the basis of its having a writing system but on the basis of how many people can read it, and how easily, then the question of why literacy declined permits some plausible conjectures.

One of them is given by Havelock himself, who indicates how, during the Dark and Middle Ages, the styles of writing the letters of the alphabet multiplied, the shapes becoming elaborated and disguised. The Europeans, it would appear, forgot that recognition, which was the Greek word for reading, must be swift and automatic if reading is to be a pervasive practice. The shapes of letters must be, so to speak, transparent, for among the marvelous features of alphabetic writing is that once the letters have been learned, one need not think about them. They disappear psychologically, and do not interpose themselves as an object of thought between the reader and his recollection of spoken language. If calligraphy calls attention to itself, or is ambiguous, the essential idea of literacy is lost, or, to be more accurate, is lost to the majority of people. Havelock writes: "Calligraphic virtuosity of any kind fosters craft literacy and is fostered by it, but is the enemy of social literacy. The unlucky careers of both the Greek and Roman versions of the alphabet during the Dark Ages and the Middle Ages sufficiently demonstrate this fact."¹² What happened in Europe—to put it simply—is not that the alphabet disappeared but that the readers' capacities to interpret it disappeared. To quote Havelock again: "Europe, in effect, reverts for a time to a condition of readership analogous to that which obtained in the pre-Greek Mesopotamian cultures."¹³

Still another explanation for the loss of literacy, by no means contradictory to the first, is that the sources of papyrus and parchment became scarce; or if not that, then that the severity of life did not allow for the energy to manufacture them. We know that paper did not come to medieval Europe until the thirteenth century, at which time the Europeans be-

gan at once to manufacture it, not in the time-honored way—by hand and foot—but by water-powered mills.¹⁴ It is surely no accident that the beginnings of the great medieval universities and a corresponding renewed interest in literacy coincide with the introduction and manufacture of paper. It is, therefore, quite plausible that the scarcity of writing surfaces for several hundred years created a situation inimical to social literacy.

We may also conjecture that the Roman Church was not insensible to the advantages of craft literacy as a means of keeping control over a large and diverse population; that is to say, of keeping control over the ideas, organization, and loyalties of a large and diverse population. Certainly it would have been in the interests of the Church to encourage a more restricted access to literacy, to have its clerics form a scribal class that alone would have access to theological and intellectual secrets.

But whatever the reasons, there can be no doubt that social literacy disappeared for close to a thousand years; and nothing can convey better the sense of what that means than the image of a medieval reader tortuously working on a text. With few exceptions, medieval readers, regardless of age, did not and could not read as we do. If such a person could have seen a modern reader whisk through a page, silently, eyes rapidly moving, lips in repose, he might have interpreted it as an act of magic. The typical medieval reader proceeded something like one of our own recalcitrant first graders: word by word, muttering to himself, pronouncing aloud, finger pointed at each word, hardly expecting any of it to make much sense.¹⁵ And here I am referring to those who were scholars. Most people did not read at all.

What this meant is that all important social interactions were conducted through oral means, face-to-face. In the Middle Ages, Barbara Tuchman tells us, "The average layman acquired knowledge mainly by ear, through public sermons, mystery plays, and the recital of narrative poems, ballads,

and tales."¹⁶ Thus, Europe returned to a "natural" condition of human communication, dominated by talk and reinforced by song. For almost all of our history, that is the way human beings have conducted their affairs and created culture. After all, as Havelock has reminded us, biologically we are all oralists. Our genes are programmed for spoken language. Literacy, on the other hand, is a product of cultural conditioning.¹⁷ To this, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the great advocate of the noble savage, would readily agree, and he would add that if men are to live as close to nature as possible, they must despise books and reading. In *Émile* he tells us that "reading is the scourge of childhood, for books teach us to talk about things we know nothing about."

Rousseau is, I believe, correct, if one may take him to mean that reading is the end of *permanent* childhood and that it undermines both the psychology and sociology of oralism. Because reading makes it possible to enter a non-observed and abstract world of knowledge, it creates a split between those who cannot read and those who can. Reading is the scourge of childhood because, in a sense, it creates adulthood. Literature of all kinds—including maps, charts, contracts, and deeds—collects and keeps valuable secrets. Thus, in a literate world to be an adult implies having access to cultural secrets codified in unnatural symbols. In a literate world children must *become* adults. But in a nonliterate world there is no need to distinguish sharply between the child and the adult, for there are few secrets, and the culture does not need to provide training in how to understand itself.

That is why, as Ms. Tuchman also notes, medieval behavior was characterized by childishness among all age groups.¹⁸ In an oral world there is not much of a concept of an adult and, therefore, even less of a child. And that is why, in all the sources, one finds that in the Middle Ages childhood ended at age seven. Why seven? *Because that is the age at which children have command over speech.* They can say and understand what adults can say and understand. They are able to

know all the secrets of the tongue, which are the only secrets they need to know. And this helps us to explain why the Catholic Church designated age seven as the age at which one was assumed to know the difference between right and wrong, the age of reason. It also helps us to explain why, until the seventeenth century, the words used to denote young males could refer to men of thirty, forty, or fifty, for there was no word—in French, German, or English—for a young male between the ages of seven and sixteen. The word *child* expressed kinship, not an age.¹⁹ But most of all, the oralism of the Middle Ages helps us to explain why there were no primary schools. For where biology determines communication competence, there is no need for such schools.

Of course, schools are not unknown in the Middle Ages, some of them associated with the Church, some of them private. But the complete absence of the idea of a primary education to teach reading and writing and to provide a foundation for further learning proves the absence of a concept of a literate education. The medieval way of learning is the way of the oralist; it occurs essentially through apprenticeship and service—what we would call “on-the-job training.” Such schools as existed were characterized by a “lack of gradation in the curricula according to the difficulty of the subject matter, the simultaneity with which subjects were taught, the mixing of the ages, and the liberty of the pupils.”²⁰ If a medieval child got to school, he would have begun as late as age ten, probably later. He would have lived on his own in lodgings in the town, far from his family. It would have been common for him to find in his class adults of all ages, and he would not have perceived himself as different from them. He certainly would not have found any correspondence between the ages of students and what they studied. There would have been constant repetition in the lectures, since new students were continuously arriving and would not have heard what the Master had said previously. There were, of course, no females present, and as soon as the

students were loosed from the discipline of the classroom, they would have been free to do whatever they wished on the outside.

What we can say, then, with certainty, is that in the medieval world there was no conception of child development, no conception of prerequisites or sequential learning, no conception of schooling as a preparation for an adult world. As Ariès sums it up: “Medieval civilization had forgotten the *paideia* of the ancients and knew nothing as yet of modern education. That is the main point: *It had no idea of education* [italics mine].”²¹

Neither, one must add at once, did it have a concept of shame, at least as a modern would understand it. The idea of shame rests, in part, on secrets, as Quintilian knew. One might say that one of the main differences between an adult and a child is that the adult knows about certain facets of life—its mysteries, its contradictions, its violence, its tragedies—that are not considered suitable for children to know; that are, indeed, shameful to reveal to them indiscriminately. In the modern world, as children move toward adulthood, we reveal these secrets to them, in what we believe to be a psychologically assimilable way. But such an idea is possible only in a culture in which there is a sharp distinction between the adult world and the child’s world, and where there are institutions that express that difference. The medieval world made no such distinction and had no such institutions.

Immersed in an oral world, living in the same social sphere as adults, unrestrained by segregating institutions, the medieval child would have had access to almost all of the forms of behavior common to the culture. The seven-year-old male was a man in every respect except for his capacity to make love and war.²² “Certainly,” J. H. Plumb writes, “there was no separate world of childhood. Children shared the same games with adults, the same toys, the same fairy stories. They lived their lives together, never apart. The coarse village festival depicted by Brueghel, showing men and women besotted

with drink, groping for each other with unbridled lust, have children eating and drinking with the adults."²³

Brueghel's paintings, in fact, show us two things at once: the inability and unwillingness of the culture to hide anything from children, which is one part of the idea of shame, and the absence of what became known in the sixteenth century as *civilité*, which is the other part. There did not exist a rich content of formal behavior for youth to learn. How impoverished that content was in the Middle Ages may be difficult for moderns to grasp. Erasmus, writing as late as 1523, gives us a vivid image of a German inn in his *Diversoria*: There are eighty to ninety people sitting together. They are of all social classes and all ages. Someone is washing clothes, which he hangs to dry on the stove. Another is cleaning his boots on the table. There is a common bowl for washing one's hands, but the water in it is filthy. The smell of garlic and other odors is everywhere. Spitting is frequent and unrestricted as to its destination. Everyone is sweating, for the room is overheated. Some wipe their noses on their clothing, and do not turn away when doing it. When the meal is brought in, each person dips his bread into the general dish, takes a bite, and dips again. There are no forks. Each takes the meat with his hands from the same dish, drinks wine from the same goblet, and sips soup from the same bowl.²⁴

In order to understand how people could have endured this—indeed, not even noticed it—we must understand, as Norbert Elias reminds us, that "such people stood in a different relationship to one another than we do. And this involves not only the level of clear, rational consciousness; their emotional life also had a different structure and character."²⁵ They did not, for example, have the same concept of private space as we do; they were not repelled by certain human odors or bodily functions; they were not shamed by exposing their own bodily functions to the gaze of others; they felt no disgust in making contact with the hands and mouths of others. Considering this, we will not be surprised to know that in the

Middle Ages there is no evidence for toilet training in the earliest months of the infant's life.²⁶ And we will perhaps expect, as was the case, that there was no reluctance to discuss sexual matters in the presence of children. The idea of concealing sexual drives was alien to adults, and the idea of sheltering children from sexual secrets, unknown. "Everything was permitted in their presence: coarse language, scabrous actions and situations; they had heard everything and seen everything."²⁷ Indeed, it was common enough in the Middle Ages for adults to take liberties with the sexual organs of children. To the medieval mind such practices were merely ribald amusements. As Ariès remarks: "The practice of playing with children's privy parts formed part of a widespread tradition. . . ."²⁸ Today, that tradition will get you up to thirty years in prison.

The absence of literacy, the absence of the idea of education, the absence of the idea of shame—these are the reasons why the idea of childhood did not exist in the medieval world. Of course, we must include in the story not only the severity of life but in particular the high rate of mortality among children. In part because of children's inability to survive, adults did not, and could not, have the emotional commitment to them that we accept as normal. The prevailing view was to have many children in the hope that two or three might survive. On these grounds, people obviously could not allow themselves to become too attached to the young. Ariès quotes from a document that records a remark made by the neighbor of a distraught mother of five children. In order to comfort the mother, the neighbor says, "Before they are old enough to bother you, you will have lost half of them, or perhaps all of them."²⁹

It is not until the late fourteenth century that children are even mentioned in wills and testaments, an indication that adults did not expect them to be around very long.³⁰ In fact, probably because of this, in some parts of Europe children were treated as neuter genders. In fourteenth-century Italy,

for example, the sex of a child who had died was never recorded.³¹ But I believe it would be a mistake to give too much importance to the high mortality rate of children as a way of explaining the absence of the *idea* of childhood. Half the people who died in London between 1730 and 1779 were under five years of age, and yet, by then, England had already developed the idea of childhood.³² And that is because, as I shall try to show in the next chapter, a new communication environment began to take form in the sixteenth century as a result of printing and social literacy. The printing press created a new definition of adulthood *based on reading competence*, and, correspondingly, a new conception of childhood *based on reading incompetence*. Prior to the coming of that new environment, infancy ended at seven and adulthood began at once. There was no intervening stage because none was needed. That is why prior to the sixteenth century there were no books on child-rearing, and exceedingly few about women in their role as mothers.³³ That is why the young were part of most ceremonies, including funeral processions, there being no reason to shield them from death. That is why there was no such thing as children's literature. Indeed, in literature "the chief role of children was to die, usually drowned, smothered, or abandoned. . . ."³⁴ That is why there were no books on pediatrics. And why paintings consistently portrayed children as miniature adults, for as soon as children abandoned swaddling clothes, they dressed exactly like other men and women of their social class. The language of adults and children was also the same. There are, for example, no references anywhere to children's jargon prior to the seventeenth century, after which they are numerous.³⁵ And that is why the majority of children did not go to school, for there was nothing of importance to teach them; most of them were sent away from home to do menial work or serve as apprentices.

In the medieval world, childhood is, in a word, invisible. Tuchman sums it up this way: "Of all the characteristics in

which the medieval age differs from the modern, none is so striking as the comparative absence of interest in children."³⁶

And then, without anyone's suspecting it, a goldsmith from Mainz, Germany, with the aid of an old winepress, gave birth to childhood.