

## Chapter 3

# THE INCUNABULA OF CHILDHOOD

The first fifty years of the printing press are called the *incunabula*, literally, the cradle period. By the time print moved out of the cradle, the idea of childhood had moved in, and its own incunabula lasted for some two hundred years. After the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries childhood was acknowledged to *exist*, to be a feature of the natural order of things. Writing of childhood's incunabula, J. H. Plumb notes that "Increasingly, the child became an object of respect, a special creature with a different nature and different needs, which required separation and protection from the adult world."<sup>1</sup> Separation is, of course, the key word. In separating people from one another, we create *classes* of people, of which children are a historic and humane example. But Mr. Plumb has it backward. Children were not separated from the rest of the population because they were believed to have a "different nature and different needs." They were believed to have a different nature and needs because they had been separated from the rest of the population. And they were separated because it became essential in their culture that they learn how

to read and write, and how to be the sort of people a print culture required.

Of course, it was not entirely clear at the beginning what reading and writing could or would do to people. As we might expect, the prevailing understandings of the process of becoming literate were naïve, just as today our grasp of the effects of electronic media are naïve. The merchant classes, for example, wanted their children to know their ABC's so that they could handle the paper world of commerce.<sup>2</sup> The Lutherans wanted people who could read both vernacular Bibles and grievances against the Church. Some Catholics saw in books a means of instilling a greater sense of obedience to scripture. The Puritans wanted reading to be the main weapon against "the three great evils of Ignorance, Prophaneness, and Idleness."<sup>3</sup> Some of them got what they bargained for, some much more.

By the mid-sixteenth century the Catholics began to pull back from social literacy, perceiving reading as a disintegrating agent, and eventually prohibited the reading of vernacular Bibles, as well as the works of such writers as Erasmus. Reading became equated with heresy, and the Index followed inexorably. The Protestants, who obviously were partial to heresy of a sort, and who, in addition, hoped literacy would aid in dispelling superstition, continued to exploit the resources of print and carried this attitude with them to the New World. Indeed, it is in Presbyterian Scotland that we find the most intense commitment to a literate education for all. In the First Presbyterian Book of Discipline of 1560, there is, for example, a call for a national system of education, the first such proposal in English history. When the Presbyterians were at the height of their political power, they enacted legislation toward that end (the Act of 1646); and in 1696, after their power was restored, they renewed and strengthened the legislation.<sup>4</sup>

One result of the Catholic defection from print and the Protestant alliance with it was an astonishing reversal of the intellectual geography of European culture. Whereas in the

medieval world the level of cultivation and sensibility was higher in the Mediterranean countries than in northern Europe, by the end of the seventeenth century the situation had turned around. Catholicism remained a religion of the image. It continued and intensified icon worship, and gave extraordinary attention to the elaboration of its churches and service. Protestantism developed as a religion of the book, and, as a consequence, discouraged icon worship and moved toward an austere symbolism. It was observed by Joseph Kay in the nineteenth century that to attract the poor to religion, one must either "adorn the spectacle," as did the Catholics, or "educate the people," as did the Protestants.<sup>5</sup> While Kay may have a point about how to attract the poor, we must not overlook the fact that a reading people develop the capacity to conceptualize at a higher level of abstraction than do the illiterate. Image-centered and lavishly embellished Catholicism was not so much an appeal to the poor as an accommodation to a public, of all levels, still habituated to concrete, iconographic symbolism. The simplicities of Protestantism emerged as a natural style for a people whom the book had conditioned to think more abstractly.

Among other things, what this meant was that childhood evolved unevenly, for after one has sifted through the historical complexities, a fairly simple equation emerges: Where literacy was valued highly and persistently, there were schools, and where there were schools, the concept of childhood developed rapidly. That is why childhood emerged sooner and in sharper outline in the British Isles than anywhere else. As early as the reign of Henry VIII, William Forrest called for primary education. At age four, he proposed, children should be sent to school "to lerne some literature" so that they might understand God's ways.<sup>6</sup> A similar idea was put forward by Thomas Starkey in his *Dialogue*, which proposed parish schools for all children under seven.<sup>7</sup> In a relatively short time the English transformed their society into an island of schools. During the sixteenth century hundreds of bequests were made by villages

for the establishment of free schools for the elementary instruction of local children.<sup>8</sup> A survey by W. K. Jordan reveals that in 1480 there were 34 schools in England. By 1660, there were 444, a school for every 4,400 people, one school approximately every 12 miles.<sup>9</sup>

There were, in fact, three kinds of schools that developed: the elementary or "petty" schools, which taught the three R's; the free schools, which taught mathematics, English composition, and rhetoric; and grammar schools, which trained the young for universities and Inns of Court by teaching them English grammar and classical linguistics. Shakespeare attended a grammar school in Stratford, and his experience there inspired him to express a famous complaint (for he had probably been required to read Lyly's *Latin Grammar*). In *Henry VI*, Part II, Shakespeare wrote:

Thou hast most traitorously corrupted the youth of the realm in erecting a grammar-school. . . . It will be proved to thy face that thou hast men about thee that usually talk of a noun, and a verb, and such abominable words as no Christian ear can endure to hear.

But most Englishmen did not agree with Shakespeare that the creation of schools corrupted the youth of the realm. Indeed, the English were not even averse to sending females to school: the free instruction given at Norwich was available to children of either sex. And although it must be understood that schooling was largely a middle- and upper-class preoccupation, there is evidence that even among the poor some women could read.

But, of course, many more men. Of 204 men sentenced to death for a first offense by Middlesex justices between 1612 and 1614, 95 of them pleaded "benefit of clergy," which meant that they could meet the challenge of reading a sentence from the Bible and, therefore, would be spared from the gallows.<sup>10</sup> Professor Lawrence Stone concludes from this that

if forty-seven percent of the criminal classes could read, the literacy rate among the total male population must have been much higher. (It is possible, of course, that the "criminal classes" were much cleverer than Professor Stone gives them credit for, and that learning to read was high among their priorities.)

In any case, literacy rates are difficult to pin down. Sir Thomas More guessed that in 1533 over half the population could read an English translation of the Bible. Most scholars agree that this estimate is too high, and have settled on a figure (for males) somewhere around forty percent, by the year 1675. This much, however, is known: In the year 1642 more than 2,000 different pamphlets were published. In 1645 more than 700 newspapers were issued. And between 1640 and 1660 the combined total of both pamphlets and newspapers was 22,000.<sup>11</sup> It is possible that by the mid-seventeenth century "England was at all levels the most literate society the world had ever known."<sup>12</sup> Certainly by the beginning of the seventeenth century its political leaders were literate. And this was apparently the case in France, as well. In England the last illiterate to hold high office was the first earl of Rutland. In France it was the Constable Montmorency.<sup>13</sup> Although the achievement of literacy in France (that is to say, the development of schools) lagged behind that of England, by 1627 there were approximately 40,000 children being educated in France.

What all of this led to was a remarkable change in the social status of the young. Because the school was designed for the preparation of a literate adult, the young came to be perceived not as miniature adults but as something quite different altogether—unformed adults. School learning became identified with the special nature of childhood. "Age groups . . . are organized around institutions," Ariès remarks, and just as in the nineteenth century, adolescence became defined by conscription, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, childhood became defined by school attendance. The word *schoolboy*

became synonymous with the word *child*. Ivy Pinchbeck and Margaret Hewitt express it this way:

Whilst under the traditional system [of apprenticeship], "childhood" effectively ended at the age of seven . . . the effect of organized formal education was to prolong the period during which children were withheld from the demands and responsibilities of the adult world. Childhood was, in fact, becoming far less a biological necessity of no more than fleeting importance; it was emerging for the first time as a formative period of increasing significance.<sup>14</sup>

What is being said here is that *childhood became a description of a level of symbolic achievement*. Infancy ended at the point at which command of speech was achieved. Childhood began with the task of learning how to read. Indeed, the word *child* was frequently used to describe adults who could not read, adults who were regarded as intellectually childish. By the seventeenth century, everyone assumed, as Plumb tells us, that "the processes of a literate education should develop with the developing child: reading should begin about four or five, writing follow, and then gradually more sophisticated subjects should be added. . . . Education [became] tied almost inflexibly to the calendar age of children."<sup>15</sup>

But the tie between education and calendar age took some time to develop. The first attempts to establish classes or grades of students were based on the capacities of students to read, not on their calendar ages.<sup>16</sup> Differentiation by age came later. As Ariès explains, the organization of school classes as a hierarchy of reading competence brought the "realization of the special nature of childhood or youth and of the idea that within that childhood or youth a variety of categories existed."<sup>17</sup> Ariès is expressing here a principle of social perception, alluded to earlier: When a group—any group—is formed on the basis of a single characteristic, it is

inevitable that other characteristics will be noticed. What starts out as a category of people who must be taught how to read ends up as a category perceived as unique in multiple dimensions. As childhood itself became a social and intellectual category, stages of childhood became visible. Elizabeth Eisenstein sums up the point: "Newly segregated at schools, receiving special printed materials geared to distinct stages of learning, separate 'peer groups' ultimately emerged, a distinctive 'youth culture' . . . came into being."<sup>18</sup>

What followed from this was inevitable, or so it seems in retrospect. For one thing, the clothing of children became different from that of adults. By the end of the sixteenth century custom required that childhood should have its special costume.<sup>19</sup> The difference in children's dress, as well as the difference in adult perception of children's physical features, is well documented in paintings from the sixteenth century forward, i.e., children are no longer depicted as miniature adults. The language of children began to be differentiated from adult speech. As noted earlier, children's jargon or slang was unknown prior to the seventeenth century. Afterward, it developed rapidly and richly. Books on pediatrics proliferated too. One such book, by Thomas Raynald, was so popular that it went through seven editions before 1600, and continued to be published as late as 1676. Even the simple act of naming children underwent change, reflecting the new status of children. In the Middle Ages it was not uncommon for identical names to be given to all siblings, distinguishing one from the other by birth-order labels. But by the seventeenth century that custom had disappeared, and parents commonly assigned each child a unique name, often determined by parents' expectations of the child.<sup>20</sup> Lagging somewhat behind other developments, children's literature began to appear in 1744, when John Newbery, a London publisher, printed the story of Jack the Giant Killer. By 1780, many professional authors had turned their attention to the production of juvenile literature.<sup>21</sup>

As the form of childhood took shape, the form of the modern family also took shape. The essential event in creating the modern family, as Ariès has emphasized, was the invention and then extension of formal schooling.<sup>22</sup> The social requirement that children be formally educated for long periods led to a reorientation of parents' relationships to their children. Their expectations and responsibilities became more serious and enriched as parents evolved into guardians, custodians, protectors, nurturers, punishers, arbiters of taste and rectitude. Eisenstein provides an additional reason for this evolution: "An unending stream of moralizing literature penetrated the privacy of the home. . . . The 'family' [became] endowed with new educational and religious functions."<sup>23</sup> In other words, with books on every conceivable topic becoming available, not only in school but in the marketplace, parents were forced into the role of educators and theologians, and became preoccupied with the task of making their children into God-fearing, literate adults. The family as educational institution begins with print, not only because the family had to ensure that children received an education at school, but also because it had to provide an auxiliary one at home.

But something else happened to the family that has a bearing on the concept of childhood and that ought not to be neglected. In England, to take the most obvious example, there emerged a visible and growing middle class, people with money and a desire to spend it. According to F.R.H. Du Boulay, here's what they did with it: "They invested it in larger homes, with additional rooms for privacy, in portraits of themselves and their families, and in their children through education and clothing. *The surplus of money made it possible to use children as objects of conspicuous consumption* [italics mine]."<sup>24</sup>

What Du Boulay wants us to take into account here is that an improved economic condition played a role in intensifying consciousness of children and in making them more socially visible. Just as it is well to remember that boys were, in fact,

the first class of specialized people, we must also remember that they were the boys of the middle class. Unquestionably, childhood began as a middle-class idea, in part because the middle class could afford it. It took another century before the idea filtered down to the lower classes.

All of these developments were the outward signs of the emergence of a new class of people. They were people who spoke differently from adults, who spent their days differently, dressed differently, learned differently, and, in the end, thought differently. What had happened—the underlying structural change—was that through print and its handmaiden, the school, adults found themselves with unprecedented control over the symbolic environment of the young, and were therefore able and required to set forth the conditions by which a child was to become an adult.

In saying this, I do not mean to imply that adults were always aware of what they were doing or why they were doing it. To a considerable extent developments were dictated by the nature of both books and schools. For example, by writing sequenced textbooks and by organizing school classes according to calendar age, schoolmasters invented, as it were, the stages of childhood. Our notions of what a child can learn or ought to learn, and at what ages, were largely derived from the concept of a sequenced curriculum; that is to say, from the concept of the prerequisite.

"Ever since the sixteenth century," Elizabeth Eisenstein remarks, "memorizing a fixed sequence of discrete letters represented by meaningless symbols and sounds has been the gateway to book learning for all children in the West."<sup>25</sup> Professor Eisenstein is here describing the first step toward adulthood—the mastery of the alphabet—which it was determined ought to occur somewhere between the ages of four and six. But the point is that the mastery of the alphabet and then mastery of all the skills and knowledge that were arranged to follow constituted not merely a curriculum but a definition of child development. By creating a concept of a hierarchy of

knowledge and skills, adults invented the structure of child development. In fact, as J. H. Plumb observes, “. . . many of the assumptions that we regard almost as belonging to human nature itself were adopted during this time.”<sup>26</sup> And since the school curriculum was entirely designed to accommodate the demands of literacy, it is astonishing that educationists have not widely commented on the relationship between the “nature of childhood” and the biases of print. For example, a child evolves toward adulthood by acquiring the sort of intellect we expect of a good reader: a vigorous sense of individuality, the capacity to think logically and sequentially, the capacity to distance oneself from symbols, the capacity to manipulate high orders of abstraction, the capacity to defer gratification.

And, of course, the capacity for extraordinary feats of self-control. It is sometimes overlooked that book learning is “unnatural” in the sense that it requires of the young a high degree of concentration and sedateness that runs counter to their inclinations. Even before “childhood” existed, the young, we can assume, were apt to be more “squiggly” and energetic than adults. Indeed, one of the several reasons why Philippe Ariès has deplored the invention of childhood is that it tended to restrain the high energy levels of youth. In a world without books and schools, youthful exuberance was given the widest possible field in which to express itself. But in a world of book learning such exuberance needed to be sharply modified. Quietness, immobility, contemplation, precise regulation of bodily functions, became highly valued. That is why, beginning in the sixteenth century, schoolmasters and parents began to impose a rather stringent discipline on children. The natural inclinations of children began to be perceived not only as an impediment to book learning but as an expression of an evil character. Thus, “nature” had to be overcome in the interests of achieving both a satisfactory education and a purified soul. The capacity to control and overcome one’s nature became one of the defining characteristics of adulthood and therefore one of the essential purposes of education; for some, *the*

essential purpose of education. “The young child which lieth in the cradle is both wayward and full of affections,” wrote the Puritans Robert Cleaver and John Dod in their book *A Godly Form of Household Government* in 1621. They went on: “And though his body be but small, yet he hath a [wrongdoing] heart, and is altogether inclined to evil. . . . If this sparkle be suffered to increase, it will rage over and burn down the whole house. For we are changed and become good not by birth but by education.”<sup>27</sup>

Notwithstanding Rousseau’s influential reaction against this sentiment, centuries of children have been subjected to an education designed to make them “good,” that is, to make them suppress their natural energies. Of course, children have never found such a regimen to their liking, and as early as 1597, Shakespeare was able to provide us with a poignant and unforgettable image of the child who knows that school is the crucible of adulthood. In the famous “ages of man” passage in *As You Like It*, Shakespeare speaks of “the whining school-boy, with his satchel/And shining morning face, creeping like snail/Unwillingly to school.”

As self-control became important as an intellectual and theological principle, as well as a characteristic of adulthood, it was accordingly reflected in sexual mores and manners. Among the early and most influential books on the subject of both was Erasmus’s *Colloquies*, published in 1516. Its intention was to set forth the manner in which boys must regulate their instinctual life. It is fair, I think, to regard this work as the first widely read secular book that takes as its theme the subject of shame. By our standards it does not quite appear that way, since Erasmus discusses matters that by the eighteenth century were already forbidden material in books for children. For example, he describes a hypothetical encounter between a youth and a prostitute, during which the youth resists the solicitations of the prostitute and instead shows her a pathway to virtue. Erasmus also describes a young man wooing a girl, as well as a woman complaining about her

husband's wayward behavior. The book tells the young, in other words, how to regard the problem of sex. At the risk of permanently injuring his reputation, one might say that Erasmus was the Judy Blume of his day. But unlike that popular modern author of widely read books about the sexuality of children, Erasmus's intention was not to reduce a sense of shame but to increase it. Erasmus knew, as did John Locke later, and Freud later still, that even when stripped of its theological connotations, shame is an essential element in the civilizing process. It is the price we pay for our triumphs over our nature. The book and the world of book learning represented an almost unqualified triumph over our animal nature; the requirements of a literate society made a finely honed sense of shame necessary. It is stretching a point only a little to say that print—by separating the message from the messenger, by creating an abstract world of thought, by demanding that body be subordinated to mind, by emphasizing the virtues of contemplation—intensified the belief in the duality of mind and body, which in turn encouraged a contemptuous regard for the body. Print gave us the disembodied mind, but it left us with the problem of how to control the rest of us. Shame was the mechanism by which such control would be managed.

By the end of the sixteenth century there existed a theology of the book, a new and growing commercial system based on print, and a new concept of the family organized around schooling. Taken together, they fiercely promoted the idea of restraint in all matters and of the necessity to make clear distinctions between private and public behavior. “[G]radually,” writes Norbert Elias, “does a [strong] association of sexuality with shame and embarrassment, and a corresponding restraint of behavior, spread more or less evenly over the whole of society. And only when the distance between adults and children grows does ‘sexual enlightenment’ become an ‘acute problem.’”<sup>28</sup> Elias is saying here that as the concept of childhood developed, society began to collect a rich content of

secrets to be kept from the young: secrets about sexual relations, but also about money, about violence, about illness, about death, about social relations. There even developed language secrets—that is, a store of words not to be spoken in the presence of children.

There is a peculiar irony in this because, on the one hand, the emerging book culture broke up “knowledge monopolies,” to use Innis's phrase. It made available theological, political, and academic secrets to a vast public that, previously, had no access to them. But on the other hand, by restricting children to book learning, by subjecting them to the psychology of the book learner and the supervision of schoolmasters and parents, print closed off the world of everyday affairs with which the young had been so familiar in the Middle Ages. Eventually, knowledge of these cultural secrets became one of the distinguishing characteristics of adulthood, so that, until recent times, one of the important differences between the child and the adult has been that adults were in possession of information that was not considered suitable for children to know. As children moved toward adulthood we revealed these secrets to them in stages, culminating in “sexual enlightenment.”

That is why, by the end of the sixteenth century, schoolteachers were already refusing to allow children to have access to “indecent books,” and punishing children for using obscene language. In addition, they were discouraging children from gambling, which in the Middle Ages had been a favorite pastime of the young.<sup>29</sup> And because children could no longer be expected to know the secrets of adult public behavior, books on manners became commonplace. Erasmus, again, led the field. In his *De Civilitate Morium Puerilium*, he set down for the edification of the young some rules on how to conduct oneself in public. “Turn away when spitting,” he says, “lest your saliva fall on someone. If anything purulent falls to the ground, it should be trodden upon, lest it nauseate someone. If you are not at liberty to do this, catch the sputum in a

small cloth. It is unmannerly to suck back saliva, as equally are those whom we see spitting at every third word not from necessity but from habit."

As to blowing one's nose, Erasmus insists that "to blow your nose on your hat or clothing is rustic . . . nor is it much more polite to use your hand. . . . It is proper to wipe the nostrils with a handkerchief, and to do this while turning away, *if more honorable people are present* [italics his]."

Erasmus was doing several things at once here. First of all, he was inducing a sense of shame in the young, without which they could not gain entry into adulthood. He was also assigning the young to the status of "barbarian," for as childhood was developing there arose the idea, noted earlier, that children are unformed adults who need to be civilized, who need to be trained in the ways of the adult. As the school book revealed to them the secrets of knowledge, so would the etiquette book reveal the secrets of public deportment. "As Socrates brought philosophy from heaven to earth," Erasmus said of his book, "so I have led philosophy to games and banquets." But Erasmus was not merely revealing adults' secrets to the young. He was also creating such secrets. It is important to know that in his books on public conduct Erasmus was addressing adults as well as children. He was building a concept of adulthood as well as a concept of childhood. We must keep in mind Barbara Tuchman's observations about the childishness of the medieval adult; that is to say, as the book and school created the child, they also created the modern concept of the adult. And when later I shall try to show that in our time childhood is disappearing, I mean to say that inevitably a certain form of adulthood is disappearing as well.

In any case, as childhood and adulthood became increasingly differentiated, each sphere elaborated its own symbolic world, and eventually it came to be accepted that the child did not and could not share the language, the learning, the tastes, the appetites, the social life, of an adult. Indeed, the

task of the adult was to prepare the child for the management of the adult's symbolic world. By the 1850s the centuries of childhood had done their work, and everywhere in the Western world childhood was both a social principle and a social fact. The irony, of course, is that no one noticed that at about the same time, the seeds of childhood's end were being planted.