

‘Quae voces audio?’

Some questions regarding the exploration of medieval British childhoods

by CHRISTIAN M. ZOTTL, Vienna/Edinburgh

I. Introduction

Considerations regarding the experience and understanding of medieval childhood will swiftly remind the historian dealing with these problems of major limitations concerning the possible investigation and exploration of historical societies and their specific mentalities.¹ An observation of the past – and here particularly the Middle Ages – does not only imply a spatial-temporal distance, but also, due to its very nature, suggests mental and material differences. Thoughts, feelings, fears, and approaches to life within most medieval societies will retain their puzzling character as long as we only scratch along the surface. However, if we wish to become ‘acquainted’ with the people of this widely unknown epoch, and want to understand their actions, habits, judgements, and decisions, then we have to be willing to accept them with all their peculiarities in order to fully apprehend their time and background. The characters we will encounter within this essay may have lived at other times, but they likewise thought, felt, experienced, rejoiced, and – depending on their outlook on life and their patterns of behaviour – achieved spiritual or material values; and all this makes them interesting for us today.

As historians, we primarily lay claim to mediating a truth that we deduce from analysing the sources available. Although we are anxious to leave 21st century values and ideas aside when dealing with historical societies, we still have to be aware of the fact that all research interests projected onto the past and its people eventually derive from contemporary questions and problems. Consequently, it is even more important to let sources speak for themselves and not to force our answers on them.² The aim of historical analysis

¹ Regarding the term <mentality> and its problems of demarcation and definition see Reinhard SCHNEIDER, *Mittelalterliche Mentalitäten als Forschungsproblem: Eine skizzierende Zusammenfassung*, in: František GRAUS (ed.), *Mentalitäten im Mittelalter: methodische und inhaltliche Probleme (Vorträge und Forschungen 35)* 1987, pp. 319-332.

² Cf. Aaron J. GURJEWITSCH, *Stumme Zeugen des Mittelalters: Weltbild und Kultur der einfachen Menschen*. 2000, pp. 12f, who, besides the cognitive responsibility of the historian, also names a moral liability

should therefore be to understand; not to judge. So, it may be noted that when referring to the Middle Ages. we are visualising almost a thousand years that must not be seen as a cultural unity. In its beginnings (which differ geographically), cultural elements and social relations of the preceding, late antique societies were still dominating. Only gradually, in the course of increasing Christianisation (including the centralisation onto Rome) and textualisation³ (at least within some social circles), an explicitly medieval, European source-culture developed which contrasted starkly in character from those of outer-European civilisations. Taking these developments into account, we nowadays distinguish between early, high and late Middle Ages.

II. Concepts of historical childhoods

Yet, returning to our overall topic of medieval childhood, to what extent is our current understanding based on the biographical information of wealthy children; boys in particular? And how influential were the chronological arrangements just mentioned for the everyday experience of the ordinary child we wish to 'recognise'? Cultural and mental historical research shows that popular attitudes and patterns of behaviour within pre-industrial, primarily agricultural societies are characterised by particular stability and tenaciousness. Consequently, the worldview as well as the way of living of average medieval people changed far slower than those of more educated contemporaries whom we mostly meet within our written sources.⁴ Additionally, we must not forget the existence of particular, partly distorted popular Christian feelings and opinions – the so-called 'popular

ity according to which past societies are not to be arranged hierarchically and opposing present ones, for this would prevent equal dialogues.

³ Regarding the dichotomy of 'Verschriftung' (transferring phonetic information into graphic symbols) and 'Verschriftlichung' (creating a qualitative distinction to orality by means of textualisation) see Wolf OESTERREICHER, *Verschriftung und Verschriftlichung im Kontext medialer und konzeptioneller Schriftlichkeit*, in: Ursula SCHAEFER (ed.), *Schriftlichkeit im Frühen Mittelalter*. 1993, pp. 267-292, as well as Patrick J. GEARY, *Oblivion Between Orality and Textuality in the Tenth Century*, in: Gerd ALTHOFF, Johannes FRIED, Patrick J. GEARY (eds.), *Medieval Concepts of the Past: Ritual, Memory, Historiography*. 2002, pp. 115f. For the bridging function of oral tradition between past and present in connection with the highly important (and potentially dangerous) medieval concept of *memoria* see GEARY, Patrick J., *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the end of the first Millenium*. 1994, p. 125 and pp. 131f.

⁴ However, we are not to view medieval societies as promoting a widely egalitarian culture. Societal differences primarily arose from membership to particular social ranks, certain more or less respected forms of occupation, or several interpersonal relations that stretched from marriage to the formation of guilds.

belief' which was at the root of many mythological understandings and medical-mythic practices. Thus, a view on childhood in the Middle Ages appears to be as delicate as the topic of medieval mentalities. Therefore, we are to exercise methodical caution in approaching its historical investigation. Given the just encountered societal differentiation, the apparent interest of medieval societies in childhood, however, seems rather small. Correspondingly, the search for sources turns out to be quite difficult. The gravest problem is that children themselves very rarely leave records, and even artefacts and objects of their own, such as books or toys, have seldom survived until today.⁵

Nowadays, we often hold the view that the first phase in a person's life is of particular importance for his⁶ character formation and directly influences his future adult life. Such a way of thinking, however, need not necessarily have been familiar to a medieval person because childhood was not always understood as preparing for and adjusting to the society around. According to Doris Desclais Berkvam⁷, we also encounter the notion of social status and nature a person is born with; this being the raw material on which further education had to build. Only in the later Middle Ages, a second interpretation emerged according to which children were compared to wax models which could be moulded with a little emphasis or pressure until a certain point in their lives.⁸ This preceded our contemporary outlook on childhood as preparatory phase for a child's future.

These two lines of thought comprise a perception of childhood from outside and *a posteriori*, and grant us only little insight into the everyday life of children and their worlds of experience. Consequently, Colin Heywood⁹ suggests a highly plausible and sensible triad concerning historical research into childhood: **(1)** Firstly, the phenomenon of child-

⁵ This repeatedly reminds us of the importance of the broad basis of different sources for this particular field of research that incorporates written as well as material, archaeological and art-historical sources.

⁶ Although I am very much aware of gender differences and of the existence of female authors/writers in the Middle Ages, I am determined to simply make use of the pronominal forms of one gender to retain a fairly acceptable orthography. It is not due to discrimination against the female, but because of the own gender of the author of this essay that it has been decided to generally opt for the masculine forms.

⁷ Cf. Doris Desclais BERKVAM, Nature and Nurture: A Notion of Medieval Childhood and Education, in: *Mediaevalia* 9 (1983) pp. 165-180.

⁸ Cf. Janet L. NELSON, Parents, children, and the Church in the earlier Middle Ages', in: Diana WOOD (ed.), *The Church and Childhood. Papers read at the 1993 Summer Meeting and the 1994 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*. 1994, p. 97.

⁹ Cf. Colin HEYWOOD, *A History of Childhood: Children and Childhood in the West from Medieval to Modern Times*. 2001, pp. 3-5.

hood as social construction is presented, according to which children and the societal approach to them can be viewed and experienced; always depending on the respective historical time, space and society. (2) This is followed by the fact that childhood always has to be considered in concordance with another well-known triad of (a) *affiliation* with a particular social stratum, (b) *sex*, and (c) *ethnicity*, all of which served as primary categories of distinction alongside with the *respective age* of the child.¹⁰ (3) And eventually, the individual children themselves must be viewed as active, determining elements of their own lives and environments. Even if we may primarily encounter adult perspectives within the sources available, these reactions, nevertheless, are the product of (in)direct interaction with children.¹¹

Following these prerequisites, researchers are additionally to be aware of their own positional dependence as well as their outlook on life, in order not to risk that present assumptions, values and norms are interwoven with their historical approach. Occasionally, this happened with societal studies of the recent past. So, we may mention the 'father' of childhood history, Phillip Ariès whose book¹² maintains the well-known, daring and often cited thesis that medieval societies lacked an idea of childhood.¹³ The intra- and interdisciplinary reactions within the last 40 years have been manifold: Whereas, particularly in the course of the New History movement in the 1970s, many tried to disprove Ariès' thesis (sometimes even in highly dogmatising ways), there were also approving or at least differentiating voices which did not reject his theory altogether. Of particular interest appears to be the approach of David Archards who postulates *a concept* of childhood for every society at any time, according to which children are distinguished from non-children: juveniles, persons of nubile age, and those able to reproduce or inherit. These various concepts, however, may consist of highly *different conceptions* that determine and enable such differentiations in the first place.¹⁴ Consequently, Ariès' assumption re-

¹⁰ Lutterbach also argues in favour of perceptible differences within the approach to childhood before and after successful Christianisation in the early Middle Ages; this would even add a fifth category of the moral-spiritual background. Cf. Hubertus LUTTERBACH, Der zivilisationsgeschichtliche Beitrag der frühmittelalterlichen Bussbücher zum christlichen Kinderschutz, in: Historisches Jahrbuch (2004) pp. 3-25.

¹¹ A condition which is of particular interest within the scope of the prosopographic approach of this essay.

¹² Phillip ARIES, L'Éfant et la familiale sous l'Ancien régime. 1960. Translated as: Centuries of Childhood. 1962.

¹³ An argument that eventually allows his 'discovery' of childhood in the late Middle Ages and the early modern times.

¹⁴ Cf. David ARCHARD, Children: Rights and Childhood. 1993, p.17 and pp. 22-24.

quires reconsideration and has to be partly verified, since our idea of childhood was absolutely alien to medieval societies. However, this still does not imply that they had no own perception of childhood.¹⁵

III. Hagiographical sources

Regarding medieval medical treatises and pedagogical instructions of behaviour, it is to be considered that their writers and compilers often had only little contact with children, and that their reports and theoretical speculations were presumably only second-hand.¹⁶ Child characters in saintly *vitae* or verse romances, likewise, are usually intended to represent outstanding traits of the future saint or hero;¹⁷ not of the average child.¹⁸ In these cases, the latent understanding of childhood almost appears as a developmental process following accepted norms and patterns.¹⁹ One of these literary *topoi* is the figure of the *puer senex*²⁰: Consequently, St. Guthlac did not imitate the impertinent behaviour of the

¹⁵ Yet, this is not to decrease the importance of Ariès' achievements as having been the first historian to make childhood a historically-developed subject of discussion.

¹⁶ However, I have to contradict Thomas Frenz when he thinks that adamant source-critique can lead to the loss of expressiveness of some sources. Even if numerous treatises and instructions were produced by persons who may not always have had actual contact with children, their sources nevertheless allow the depiction of their attitudes to and experiences of (and possibly even of their own) childhood. Cf. Thomas FRENZ, *Aspekte der Kindheit im Mittelalter und der Frühen Neuzeit*, in: Johanna FORSTER, Uwe KREBS (eds.), *Kindheit zwischen Pharao und Internet: 4000 Jahre in interdisziplinärer Perspektive*. 2001, pp. 41-55.

¹⁷ Cf. Augustine, *The Confessions*, edd. Gillian CLARK. 1993, pp. 46-48.

¹⁸ Janet L. Nelson goes even further in explaining the behaviour of saints during their childhood as being the exact opposite of otherwise usual childlike conduct. See Nelson (s. n. 8) p. 86. Such generalisations may appear similarly exaggerated to me, but we cannot deny that most of which saints tend to rebuke is not dissimilar to aspects of present-day childhood behaviour.

¹⁹ Cf. Donald WEINSTEIN, Rudolph M. BELL, *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700*. 1982, p. 19 and p. 26. I vehemently contradict Richard B. LYMAN., *Barbarism and Religion: Late Roman and Early Medieval Childhood*, in: Lloyd DEMASSE (ed.), *History of Childhood*. 1976, p. 77, and Robert PATTISON, *The Child Figure in English Literature*. 1978, pp. 20f and p. 45, who postulate a total absence of children within the medieval English literature, and may hereby refer to the compilation of Daniel T. Kline on medieval literature for children. Particularly see Lynnea BRUMBAUGH-WALTER, *Selections from the Gesta Romanorum*, Stephen J. HARRIS, *Ælfric's Colloquy*, and Stephen YANDELL, *Selections from Math Son of Mathonwy, from the Mabinogi*, all in Daniel T. KLINE (ed.), *Medieval Literature for children*. 2003.

²⁰ Regarding the terminology see Ernst Robert CURTIUS, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*. 1948, pp. 108f. István Bejczy, however, makes use of the phrase *sacra infantia*, by means of which he on the one hand is able to successfully distance himself from the allegedly male *puer* of the source lan-

other children; St. Cuthbert who liked to run round screaming with ferocious voice was rebuked by a three-year old with the dignity of an old man for his improper and playful behaviour at the age of seven (the end of *infantia!*); Athanasius used to play bishop at the beach, baptising other children; and Caesarius of Arles frequently gave away the shirt off his back and generally returned home half-naked.²¹ Sanctity seems not to have been the result of a continuous process of spiritual maturing, but was directly and instantaneously given by God; sometimes even in the case of an *infans* and to the chagrin of his parents.²²

Yet, sometimes these conventions were breached and the outcome appears quite familiar: St. Augustine²³ frequently remembers smaller thefts, swindling, and cheating; but also cheerful ball games.²⁴ And John Chrysostomos even calls the behaviour of children irrational and sometimes downright angry: In the case of having unintentionally hit an object or having experienced pain by falling, children need to let their anger out in kicking someone or something.²⁵ Consequently, the Old Irish laws treat accidents and unintentional injuries of children who played together separately: With most games, such as hurling, jumping, swimming, playing hide-and-seek, or juggling, no claim to compensation payments could be laid.²⁶

guage (see further down), and on the other hand refrains from limiting his terminology gender-specifically *a priori*. Cf. István P. BEJCY, The Sacra Infantia in medieval hagiography, in: Dianna WOOD (ed.), The Church and Childhood. Papers read at the 1993 Summer Meeting and the 1994 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society. 1994, pp. 143-151.

²¹ For Guthlac: Cf. Felix, Life of St. Guthlac, edd. B. COLGRAVE. 1956, ch. 12, p. 78. For Cuthbert: See Bede's Life of Cuthbert, ch.1, in B. COLGRAVE (ed.), Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert. 1940, pp. 154-158. For Athanasius: Cf. Rufinus. Ecclesiastical History 1.14, in: PL 21, col. 487. On Caesarius: See KLINGSHIRN W. (ed.), Caesarius of Arles: Life, Testament, Letters. 1994.

²² So, the saint could clearly and publicly be distinguished from his ordinary contemporaries from the very beginning, and his behaviour could be interpreted as an immediate manifestation of the divine will. Cf. Aaron J. GURJEWITSCH, Mittelalterliche Volkskultur. 1987, pp. 68-124.

²³ He had a humble background and was the child of a Christian mother and a non-Christian father.

²⁴ Childlike behaviour: cf. Augustine, Confessions 1.19.30, in: CLARK (s. n. 17) p. 17. For Ball games cf. Augustine, Confessions 1.8-1.10, in: Augustine, Confessions, edd. W. CHADWICK. 1991, pp. 11f.

²⁵ Cf. Gillian CLARK, The Fathers and the children, in: Dianna WOOD (ed.), The Church and Childhood. Papers read at the 1993 Summer Meeting and the 1994 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society. 1994, p. 21, n. 54, citing John Chrysostomos, Homily 4 on Colossians, in: PG 62, col. 329.

²⁶ See Fergus KELLY, Guide to Early Irish Law. 1987, pp.150f. Nevertheless, some games are mentioned which did entail legal consequences and compensatory payment in the case of injuries. These were e.g.: throwing a wooden javelin into a group of children, or engaging in an unequal contest of few against many.

Visual depictions of children are also to be viewed within the context of an overall artistic development of the representation of the human body: As long as only particular types of human beings were shown without much realism intended, hardly any specific childlike traits can be ascribed to the representation of (alleged) children.²⁷ When such tensions eventually become visible for the first time and even adults are presented more individually, this does not necessarily imply new attitudes towards children and childhood, as Ariès argued.²⁸ In a similar way, we have to treat the specific nature of children that he could not trace in his medieval sources either. After a concise examination of at least some early medieval legal corpora (mainly Anglo-Saxon and Old Irish ones), I have come to contradict Ariès even in this respect.²⁹

Already the handing over of children to monastic institutions, a phenomenon we generally describe as *oblatio (Dei)*, seems to have been acquainted with particular criteria of age, at least in the early and high Middle Ages.³⁰ Thomas Frenz gives the age of some celebrities at their entry in a monastery: So, Boniface and Thomas Aquinas are both said to have been five years old, Bede and Hermannus Contractus had reached seven years of

²⁷ Cf. PASTOUREAU, Michel, Embleme, Attribute und Inszenierungen der Jugend in der mittelalterlichen Darstellung, in: Giovanni LEVI, Jean-Claude SCHMITT (eds.), *Geschichte der Jugend – Band 1*. 1996, p. 305 and esp. pp. 309-312. See also Henrietta LEYSER, *Medieval women: A Social History of Women in England 450-1500*. 2004, pp. 139f.

²⁸ Cf. Ilene H. FORSYTH, *Children in Early Medieval Art: Ninth through Twelfth Centuries*, in: *Journal of Psychohistory* 4 (1976) pp. 36f. See also Colin MORRIS, *The Discovery of the Individual, 1050-1200*. 1972, pp. 86-91.

²⁹ The West-Saxon king Æthelstan e.g. decided at the beginning of the 10th century that all thieves older than 12 who had stolen goods worth more than 12 pence should be executed. Cf. Laws §6.1 in: Sally CRAWFORD, *Childhood in Anglo-Saxon England*. 1999, p. 177. But having re-examined the matter with some of his legal advisers who did not like to see young persons killed for so small an offence, and because the aforementioned law seems to have been executed quite frequently, the king raised the age limit to fifteen years. Cf. Laws §6.12 in: CRAWFORD (s. n. 29) p. 177. The Old Irish laws even go a little further and classify thieves between the age of 12 and 17 (who still were placed under the care of their head of the household) as 'thieves of restitution'. This meant that no legal consequences arose from their offences as long as they returned the stolen goods or goods of the same value. Cf. KELLY (s. n. 26) p. 83.

³⁰ Regarding the gradual change of oblation due to the wide acceptance of the *Regula Benedicti* from the 9th century onwards and due to the Benedictine Reform in the 10th century see John DORAN, *Oblation or obligation? A canonical ambiguity*, in: Diana WOOD (ed.), *The Church and Childhood. Papers read at the 1993 Summer Meeting and the 1994 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*. 1994, esp. pp. 129f. Often addressed as abandonment (see CLARK [s. n. 25] pp. 1f, or J. BOSWELL, *The Kindness of Strangers: the Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance*. 1988.) oblation implied much more than a mere removal of the child from its family, as exemplarily demonstrated by NELSON (s. n. 8) pp. 105-112.

age, Hugh of Lincoln (†1200) was eight, and Hrabanus Maurus was not given to a religious institution by his parents before the age of nine.³¹ Even some of the medical assumptions varied in their views on children and juveniles: According to the various schools of thought and the search for graphic parallels³², it was possible to distinguish between three (Hippocrates) or five (Avicenna) developmental stages from the newborn baby until the physically mature adult.³³ However, a closer look shows that remarks about the respective ages often remain fairly vague, given the highly ambivalent terminology of the language used. For <child>, even nowadays a rather undifferentiated term, we encounter *puer*, *kneht*, *fante*, *vaslet*, and *enfes*, which could all additionally imply dependent relationships and employment and as such need not definitely have been bound to a particular age.

IV. Penitentiary literature

At this point, a highly interesting source-genre might be of further help – medieval penitentials which have been examined exemplarily for the early Middle Ages by Rob Meens. Interestingly, he acknowledges a notable distinction within the terminology used: Children who have sinned are never called *infantes*, but are always described as *pueri*. Meens relates this to the definition of *infantia* by Isidore (of Seville) which approximately meant a period in a child's life ranging from birth until the age of seven;³⁴ the subsequent phase of *pueritia*, however, could last until twenty and in monastic circles even until twenty-five.³⁵ Another ambivalent term we encounter is *parvulus*, which could refer to a non-baptised, deceased neonatal,³⁶ a stealing child of ten,³⁷ or even an adolescent³⁸ engag-

³¹ Cf. Thomas FRENZ, Mittelalterliche Auffassungen von Krankheit und Behinderungen und ihre Folgen für die Behandlung behinderter Schüler, in: M. LIEDTKE (ed.), Behinderung als pädagogische und politische Herausforderung (Schriftenreihe zum Bayerischen Schulmuseum Ichenhausen 14) 1996, p. 156.

³² E.g. between stages of life and humours, celestial bodies, divine virtues, etc.

³³ For more details cf. Nicholas ORME, Medieval Children. 2001, pp. 6-8.

³⁴ Cf. LEYSER (s. n. 27) pp. 133f.

³⁵ Cf. Rob MEENS, Children and Confession in the Early Middle Ages, in: Diana WOOD (ed.), The Church and Childhood. Papers read at the 1993 Summer Meeting and the 1994 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society. 1994, pp. 53f.

³⁶ Cf. *Paenitentiale Vinniani*, C. 47-48, in Ludwig BIELER, The Irish Penitentials: With an appendix by D. A. Binchy (Scriptores Latini Hiberniæ 5). 1963, p. 92. Also NELSON (s. n. 8) p. 90.

³⁷ Cf. *Paenitentiale Cummeani*, I, 13, in BIELER (s. n. 36) p. 112.

ing in sinful sexual activities. Therefore, it is understandably difficult to grasp the real age of the children appearing. Although penitentials originated within the scope of monastic education (and some of the sources explicitly refer to children in monasteries), we have to assume their wider circulation, regarding their frequent occurrence. Consequently, it is very likely that they also served the mundane clergy as guidelines in connection with the popular confession. The original terminology (supposedly adequate for male *oblates* in the monasteries) was also taken over unaltered and, thus, need not exclusively refer to male sinners. It seems highly plausible to assume similar semantic developments as we find them in modern Romance languages, such as Spanish or French, where the masculine plural forms are used for all mixed-sex groups. In this respect, *infantes*, *pueri*, and *parvoli* could be understood as referring to children and adolescents of both sexes; the explicit absence of female forms, as e.g. *puellae*, could then be no longer interpreted as a particularly misogynist attitude of the compilers of these penitentials.

Children's offences are mentioned within all penitentials only until the young offenders had grown out of the state of *infantia* and consequently could be addressed as *pueri*.³⁹ Hence, we find a particular catalogue of sins mentioning thefts (mostly linked to greed and gluttony), unseemly behaviour,⁴⁰ brawls, and slight sexual offences (supposedly from puberty on).⁴¹ Of exceptional value is the *Paenitentiale Cummeani* which first emerged among monastic circles in 7th century Ireland and seems to have adapted the frame of its penances to these secluded institutions:⁴² Depending on age and mental state, thefts led to between seven and forty days of penance. Slight sexual trespasses, as e.g. kissing or the

³⁸ Cf. *Paenitentiale Parisiensi*, C. 53 in Hermann J. SCHMITZ, *Die Bussbücher und das kanonische Bussverfahren*. 1898 (repr. 1958), p. 330.

³⁹ Cf. MEENS (s. n. 35) p. 61, who refers to the various prefaces of the penitentials that rebuke the mechanical application of the various penances given and contain some advice regarding the adequate measure of penance according to age, sex, mental state and occupation of the respective sinner.

⁴⁰ Smaller children (called *parvoli*) have to do penance for seven days, older children get twenty days, and adolescents even do penance for forty days. Cf. *Paenitentiale Cummeani*, X, 1, and X, 21, in BIELER (s. n. 36) pp. 126-128.

⁴¹ Cf. *Paenitentiale Cummeani*, I, 13, III, 1-2, and X, 10, in BIELER (s. n. 36) p. 112, p. 116 and p. 128.

⁴² Even the non-explicitly monastic penitential of Theodore of Canterbury contains numerous child-specific entries and restrictions of ecclesiastical regulations in connection with children; some even allow the consumption of meat. See Patricia QUINN, *Better than the Sons of Kings: Boys and Monks in the Early Middle Ages* (Studies in History and Culture 3) 1989, p. 91 und pp. 127f. See also Kathryn Ann TAGLIA, *The Cultural Construction of Childhood: Baptism, Communion, and Confirmation*, in: Constance M. ROUSSEAU (ed.), *Women, marriage, and family in medieval Christendom: essays in memory of Michael M. Sheehan*. 1998, pp. 275f and n. 42.

imitation of sexual activities, demanded for strict fasting for six to twenty days. Anal intercourse and sexual interactions with animals, however, brought with them a penance of up to two years for adolescents; four years even for adults.⁴³ If older *fratres*, however, committed indecent assaults on younger ones (with or without the latter's consent), both had to do penance; something that Meens does not relate to the intention behind the action, but rather to the spiritual pollution which prohibited any potential approaching of the altar.⁴⁴ Yet, concluding all these violations, I also have to mention Bede's letter to bishop Egbert of York, stating that there were still innumerable virtuous and morally correct people: *pueri* as well as *puellae*, *iuvenes* and *virgines*, and (last but not least) *senes* and *anus*.⁴⁵

Apart from their primarily theological-punitive considerations, penitentials also allow insight into the everyday life of medieval children; especially when concerning parental care and the well being of the child. But even here, we are to remember that relations between parents and children are to be regarded within a wider social context. So, within the *Excarpsus Cummeani*, we find a specific canon forbidding⁴⁶ mothers to place their children in an oven or on the roof in order to cure fever.⁴⁷ Likewise, an 11th century penitential demands a whole year's penance for the neglect of a child leading to death: The cases referred to plunging into water or falling into a pit.⁴⁸ The mother who placed her child beside the open hearth, which led to life-threatening burnings (with subsequent death) from the boiling water of a pot that was set onto the hearth afterwards, is to do penance for three years.⁴⁹ During *infantia*, the whole responsibility was obviously incumbent on

⁴³ Cf., X, 5, and X, 15. Both in BIELER (s. n. 36) p. 128.

⁴⁴ Cf. MEENS (s. n. 35) p. 63, who also found the just mentioned offence in the *Paenitentiale Cummeani*, X, 17. See also BIELER (s. n. 36) p. 128.

⁴⁵ Without doubt, all of them contributed to the weekly masses on Sunday. Cf. Bede, Ecclesiastical History and Letter to Egbert, edd. D. FARMER. 1990, p. 348.

⁴⁶ MEENS (s. n. 35) p. 60, assumes ecclesiastical fears of potential magical practices behind this rather high level of penance.

⁴⁷ Cf. *Excarpsus Cummeani*, VII, 14, in: Das *Poenitentiale Remense* und der sogenannte *Excarpsus Cummeani*: Überlieferung, Quellen und Entwicklung zweier kontinentaler Bußbücher aus der 1. Hälfte des 8. Jahrhunderts, edd. Franz B. ANSBACH. 1975.

⁴⁸ *Paenitentiale Pseudo Fulberti*, C. 11, in Das sogenannte *Paenitentiale Fulberti*: Überlieferung, Verfasserfrage, Edition, edd. Franz KERFF, in: Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte – Kanonische Abteilung 73 (1987) pp. 30-32.

⁴⁹ The person who put the pot on the fire goes unpunished.

the child's mother and she alone was called to account in case of any accident.⁵⁰ Although the sources in all these circumstances do not explicitly focus on lower social strata, the frequent mentioning of such domestic activities seem to touch upon the lives of farmers and handicraftsmen.

Despite such incidents which may have mostly resulted from childlike curiosity, parents were, of course, highly interested in feeding and clothing their children according to their resources, and tried to enable them an adequate education; by and large, to secure the survival of the next generation. Children, consequently, were deeply indebted to their parents, a fact we are often able to deduce from their legal status and their societal acceptance. Until having reached nubile age (which may have begun at the entry to puberty: girls⁵¹ around 12, boys at 14), they remained under the authority of the *patria potestas* of the head⁵² of their household. It was he who eventually decided when and whom the children entrusted to him married, for the dowry (♀)/wedding gift (♂) which he eventually contributed was a part of his own personal possessions. The mother could contribute to the education and up-bringing of the children as well because she likewise may have had personal property at her disposal. And due to the fact that she may have been the first attachment figure for a newborn child⁵³ and because her position was far less dominant than that of her spouse, the relations between mother and children may have also been characterised by deeper emotional bonds.

⁵⁰ Cf. the respective entry in the *Paenitentiale Theodori* in CRAWFORD (s. n. 29) p. 94 and endnote ch. 7/8, p. 183. Cf. *Paenitentiale Burchardi*, C.174, in SCHMITZ (s. n. 38) p. 447.

⁵¹ Theoretically, the entry into marriageable age also corresponded to the beginning of the reproductive period of women. But we may remember the assumption of Soranus (of Ephessos), a Greek gyneologist of the 1st century A.D., who emphasises that girls in puberty may be able to conceive, but may physically not be ready for pregnancy and childbirth. Cf. Soranus, *Gynecology*. Transl. and edd. by Owsei TEMKIN. 1956, Gyn. 1.8.33. Not to mention their lack of mental inaptitude.

⁵² Disregarding whether this was the biological father, the foster-father or any older male relative.

⁵³ Even if Soranus argues for a period of grace of three weeks after birth for the mother: cf. Soranus (s. n. 51) Gyn. 2.11.18.

V. Stories form everyday life

Affectionate and caring relationships between parents and children can also be found in several saintly *vitae*⁵⁴ and miracle records. A recurring motif is the wondrous healing of sick children who often had gone on pilgrimage together with their parents.⁵⁵ Eleanora C. Gordon exemplarily examined these sources concerning five English saints: she was able to demonstrate interesting disparities between the sexes and could even uncover part of their social backgrounds.⁵⁶ The cult around Thomas Becket became particularly widespread.⁵⁷ On a more local level, it was especially the child-martyr William of Norwich who appealed to a diversified audience, including burghers, artisans and craftsmen, as well as the local gentry and clergy. The pilgrims of St. Godric (who had been living as a hermit near Durham), on the contrary, consisted almost exclusively of members of the local rural communities.

From all these backgrounds, children sought spiritual healing when coming to the respective saintly tombs. Among all the records, Gordon noticed the preponderance of miraculous healings of boys: Of the 212 children taken into account, 145 are said to have been male, 57 are addressed as female, and in the case of the remaining 10 their sex could not be explicitly deduced from the textual documents. A similar distributional pattern is found for all five saints.⁵⁸ Potential explanations for such disparate pattern may be: *Boys were more cared for than girls, and parents were more likely to go on pilgrimage with or

⁵⁴ Regarding the miraculous healing of St. Cuthbert's lame knee see COLGRAVE (s. n. 21) ch. 4. The activities of St. Germanus are related by Bede in his *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, HE.I.29.

⁵⁵ Cf. Hans-Werner Goetz's statistical evaluation of 22 saintly vitae and miracle records between the 6th and the 9th century according to which in 26 cases children were accompanied by both of their parents, in 17 cases only the father had come with them, but in overwhelmingly 44 cases the mother had joined her child in the pilgrimage. See Hans-Werner GOETZ, *Frauen im frühen Mittelalter: Frauenbild und Frauenleben im Frankenreich*. 1995, p. 228, n. 169.

⁵⁶ Eleanora C. GORDON, *Child health in the Middle Ages as seen in the miracles of five English saints, A.D. 1150-1220*, in: *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 60 (1986) pp. 502-522. The five saints were St. Thomas Becket at Canterbury (12th century), St. Wulfstan at Worcester (early 13th century), St. William at Norwich (12th century), St. Godric at Finchale (near Durham; late 12th century) and St. Frideswide at Oxford (lived in 8th century, but miracles started only in the late 12th century).

⁵⁷ Not least because Canterbury sold so-called Becket-water which had allegedly come into being by washing the blood-drained cloths with which the floor of the cathedral had been swept after Thomas' martyrdom. So we may not be surprised to even find some of the miracles attributed to him being far away from the actual location of his bodily remains in Canterbury.

⁵⁸ In the case of St. Wulfstan girls are absent altogether. Cf. the respective table in GORDON (s. n. 56) p. 506.

for them. *Male children were more likely to suffer from injuries and pain, due to their more violent games and the fact that they had to assist within agricultural households⁵⁹ from early age on. *The number of boys is distorted due to the ambivalent use of language in the source-text.⁶⁰

Anyway, the miracle records surely relate all kinds of everyday circumstances in which a medieval child could be harmed; sometimes even in very lively colours. The catalogue of injuries and illnesses ranged from acute cases, chronic afflictions, and direct consequences of accidents, to the development of serious disabilities, and gynaecological complications.⁶¹ After successful healings, parents often made offerings in the form of candles with the respective bodily measures of their children.⁶² Interestingly, all the miracle records taken into account seem to contradict the commonly accepted notion that medieval childhood only could be made accessible via the lives of wealthy boys. Let me, for once, refrain from accepting the allegedly male surplus and the potential terminological distortions, and visualise the broad social spectrum we encounter within the source-texts. Although we are not given ego-records of members of lower social strata, we are at least given considerable insight into their everyday life (particularly within the category <accidents>): Children are swept under mill wheels, unintentionally inhale some grain, suffer from pebbles in their ears, almost drown in their bath tube, or plunge into wells.⁶³ The compilers of their miraculous healings, contrary to the composers of other written source material, did not mean to particularly defame their lower social backgrounds; the primary concern was to emphasise the importance and efficiency of the respective saint in curing illnesses and their after-effects. Only when two different societal categories were compared, persons of lower social rank were presented as being helpless:⁶⁴ So, a farmer from Norfolk is said to have injured the head of his small daughter with his pitchfork when she

⁵⁹ Cf. Fergus KELLY, *Early Irish Farming – a study based mainly on the law-texts of the 7th and 8th centuries AD*. 2000, pp. 451f.

⁶⁰ Similar to the use of the highly generalised term *pueri*: cf. the respective considerations regarding the above mentioned penitentials.

⁶¹ Acute cases: sudden swelling, constipation, fever, infections of the eye or swooning. Chronic afflictions: immobility, epilepsy, blindness, ulcers or bladder stones. Consequences of accidents: nearly drowning, head injuries, or incisions. Serious disabilities: deafness and dumbness, blindness and dumbness, or all three together.

⁶² Cf. GORDON (s. n. 56) pp. 509f.

⁶³ Cf. GORDON (s. n. 56) mill wheel: p. 515; inhaling: p. 514; pebble: p. 511; drowning: p. 515; well: p. 519. See also ORME (s. n. 33) pp. 98-100 for accidents and pp. 106-111 for paediatric illnesses.

⁶⁴ Cf. GORDON (s. n. 56) p. 515f.

had been hiding in a haystack. His lord, a knight, immediately came to his assistance and removed the pitchfork that the father had let *in situ*⁶⁵ before he began to give first aid.⁶⁶

Even the circumstances under which many of the sick and injured children travelled to the location of their subsequent healing provide a broad social spectrum. Especially in the case of (seriously) handicapped children, a lengthy journey may have meant an additional burden. So, we are e.g. told of a father who undertook a twenty miles journey to Norwich pushing a wheelbarrow with his disabled and spastic son in it. Another man rode the 45 miles from Malmesbury to Worcester within two days, carrying his blind and retarded son. Some parents obviously spared neither time nor pains nor expenses in order to attempt to change the lives of their offspring to the better; and the saints to whom they eventually turned may not have been the first instances in their search for healing. Even if many of these records really appear miraculous to us, it is not of importance whether an actual healing took place, but rather what parents understood by the healing of their children;⁶⁷ often the conditions of the illnesses or injuries may not have been that dramatic, but even a slightly notable improvement of the quality of life may have been understood as a miracle, since it enabled the children to participate more or less normally in family life again.

VI. Conclusion

These considerations necessarily have us return to the initial questions from a more distinguished perspective. Our present understanding of medieval childhood is based on an abundance of different source-genres whose immediate comparability is not always inevitably given. We also have to take into account that the term «medieval» implies an epoch

⁶⁵ The source calls him dumb witted, but there may have been other explanations than just a poor mental state. Since we are not told that the father called for his lord himself, we may assume that he was suffering from acute shock. Besides, the immediate removal of the pitchfork without a close previous examination of the wound could also have entailed extremely negative consequences, as e.g. the sudden rise of heavy blood flow.

⁶⁶ However, only after the advice of the knight's wife, he solemnly promised on the behalf of the little girl to make an offering to St. Thomas of Canterbury (to whom he had been planning to undertake a pilgrimage anyway).

⁶⁷ Cf. Benedicta WARD, *Miracles and the medieval mind: theory, record and even, 1000-1215*. 1987, pp. 215f.

of almost a thousand years in Europe, and this wide geographical and temporal space raises further questions of cultural comparisons within and between medieval societies. Undoubtedly, the majority of the written sources that have survived into our time was produced by (and partly even for) a relatively small literary circle. Members of lower social strata often neither had the time nor the education to record their own thoughts, ideas and approaches to life; they furthermore may not have seen any benefit for their immediate everyday life in doing so.⁶⁸ Despite linguistic and terminological considerations, male perspectives seem to prevail, but we are to remember that it were mostly male composers writing for male readers. Nevertheless we are given deep insight into the world of various layers of medieval societies, as long as we are willing and able to allow the sources available to speak freely for themselves; for a voice is only given to those who are also heard.

⁶⁸ Yet, I do not consent to the widely accepted belief that medieval people only worked towards their own survival. Even if many may only have proverbially lived from hands to mouths, the impressions of all these 'silent witnesses' (Aaron J. Gurjewitsch may excuse this adaptation of the title of his book) we are given are far more colourful, show a many-faceted everyday culture and express a proper extent of '*joie de vivre*'.

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Christian Michael Zottl
71/10 Ratcliffe Terrace
Edinburgh
EH9 1SU
Scotland/UK
a0003567@unet.univie.ac.at