

# Leeds Studies in English

New Series XLII

2011

Edited by

Alaric Hall



Editorial assistants  
Helen Price and Victoria Cooper

*Leeds Studies in English*

<[www.leeds.ac.uk/lse](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/lse)>

School of English  
University of Leeds

2011

## **Purity and *Pueritia*: The Anti-Theme of Childhood Innocence in Late Medieval English Courtesy Books**

Joanna Bellis

The starting-point for this article is the linguistic resemblance between *puer* and *pur*, the tempting etymological simulacra that represent a crux in the patristic debate about childhood. Medieval theologians were divided over whether the native quality of childhood was purity, or whether the child was corrupted by original sin from conception. This article investigates the ramifications of the conflicted theology of childhood innocence for the English courtesy literature of the later Middle Ages, whose practical purpose was the education of noble children. It contends that medieval children's literature, although often dismissed as textually unsophisticated, is far less simplistic in its understanding of childhood than the theological models to which it responded. The contradictory theological models of childhood were a reductive, problematic but ineluctable context for those writers whose task it was to educate real children in the habits of courtesy.

The article will propose two things: firstly, that while the religious literature reduced children to a symbolic object of adult imitation, the social literature sought to school children in imitation of adult behaviour, and thus at its heart was a crucial conflict with mainstream Christian writing on childhood. The courtesy authors found their own, pedagogically orientated, depiction of childhood diametrically opposed to spiritual paradigm of the respected and authoritative patristic and scholastic texts, and thus they were forced to sublimate the ironic circularity in which they were bound. Contradiction defines their response to other philosophies of childhood, but it is a contradiction that, although central, is necessarily unspoken. The theme of childhood innocence in their sources becomes an anti-theme in these texts, simultaneously central and intensely problematic. Secondly, the article will argue that it was not only from spiritual, but in secular culture, that the pressure from idealised models of childhood was felt. The courtesy manuals were written for noble and gentry children, to instruct them in how to conduct themselves in a manner suitable to their pedigree. But secular courtly literature is full of examples of children whose nobility is innate and self-authenticating. The courtesy books' negotiation of these two literatures, sacred and secular, whose culturally dominant philosophies of childhood fundamentally undermined their own, is a subtle one. But, for all its caution and thoughtfulness, it constitutes a rebuttal and a re-examination by one of the lowliest of medieval genres, vernacular instruction for children, of the claims of major theologians, as well as the dominant models for conceptualising childhood that were circulating in secular literature.

## *Purity and 'Pueritia'*

The discussion will begin by examining the contradictory theological paradigms available for conceptualising childhood in the Middle Ages: one emphasising the innate sinfulness of the child from conception; the other, the purity of the pre-pubescent, pre-sinful age. Its first section will discuss the tension in the patristic literature, and the second will show how it was inherited by vernacular religious writers of the late Middle Ages. The third will turn to the courtesy books, contrasting the literature written *about* with that written *for* children. Setting these texts in their religious context, the ideological differences between them crystallise into a binary between theologised idealisation and sentimental exemplarity, on the one hand, and pragmatic reality on the other. The courtesy manuals' explicit advice for children entails a mediation of these models that constitutes a third way: an innocence that is acknowledged, but unsentimental and unspiritualised. Their shift in focus from the child as object to the child as subject means that their interpretation of childhood, although it is inflected by theological discourse, rejects and corrects its paradigms. The discussion will end by examining the social context of courtly literature, and the even more acute pressures its models of innate childhood innocence placed on instructional literature for children. The meme of the innocent child that is prominent in both secular and sacred cultural matrices demanded a cultural reappraisal by the courtesy books, which acknowledged its force, but quietly undermined its validity.

It is half a century since Philippe Ariès's controversial book *L'Enfant et la Vie Familiale sous l'Ancien Régime* argued for 'the complete absence of the modern notion of childhood' in the medieval period, yet his ideas were largely responsible for the energy that has since been poured into investigating childhood in history.<sup>1</sup> His book is the given anterior to P. J. P. Goldberg and Felicity Riddy's recent essay collection *Youth in the Middle Ages*, whose introduction, entitled 'After Ariès', counters his allegation that 'the modern idea of the family ... produced the idea of the child', and that before the early modern period medieval parents saw their children essentially as miniature adults.<sup>2</sup> Ariès held that the high rate of infant mortality, coupled with the necessity that children perform the same manual tasks as adults, did not allow for the concept of an extended period of 'childhood' as a stage between infancy and maturity — evinced by the fact that children appear as small adults in many artistic representations. And although Ariès is now refuted, his work continues to be a point of departure, and responses to and rebuttals of it have formed some of the best modern studies of medieval children. Shulamith Shahar's *Childhood in the Middle Ages* states that its central thesis is a refutation of the allegation that 'a concept of childhood' did not exist in the medieval period; likewise, reviewing a comprehensive set of evidence, Nicholas Orme's recent book claims 'it cannot be over-emphasised that there is nothing to be said for Ariès's view of childhood in the middle ages'.<sup>3</sup> This article will not recapitulate arguments comprehensively made elsewhere: it makes the assumption that the Middle Ages did have a concept of childhood, and will not marshal more evidence in support of this. But it will

<sup>1</sup> 'L'absence complète du sentiment moderne de l'enfance' (my translation), Philippe Ariès, *L'Enfant et la Vie Familiale sous l'Ancien Régime* (Paris: Plon, 1960), p. 102.

<sup>2</sup> P. J. P. Goldberg, Felicity Riddy, and Mike Tyler, 'Introduction: After Ariès', in *Youth in the Middle Ages*, ed. by P. J. P. Goldberg and Felicity Riddy (York: York Medieval Press, 2004), pp. 1–10 (p. 2).

<sup>3</sup> Shulamith Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 1–6; Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Children* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 9. See also Barbara A. Hanawalt, *Growing Up in Medieval London: The Experience of Childhood in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); R. C. Finucane, *The Rescue of the Innocents: Endangered Children in Medieval Miracles* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997); Pierre Riché and Danièle Alexandre-Bidon, *L'Enfance au Moyen Age* (Paris: Aubier, 1994); and Sally Crawford, *Childhood in Anglo-Saxon England* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1999).

interrogate the complexities of that concept, informed as it was by conflicting theological and social pressures. It responds to Goldberg and Riddy's comment that 'the inherent tendency of the evidence to reflect ideology rather than social practice' leaves a blinkered picture of medieval children.<sup>4</sup> In analysing some of the lesser-known conduct literature, it suggests that this distinction between social practice and ideology is crucial to understanding medieval paradigms of childhood, and it is precisely because the courtesy books occupy a hinterland between the two that they are in hermeneutic conflict with the very culture whose mores they seek to instil.

## The theological background

Before turning to the courtesy literature that is the main focus of this article, this section will contextualise the paradigms of childhood innocence that the Middle Ages inherited, and will demonstrate that already in patristic literature the idea of childhood innocence was complex and contradictory. The particular crux of this debate was whether the proper quality of childhood was native purity; or whether the infant, sharing the sin of the first parent, was from birth innately as sinful as the adult. Augustine, responding to the Pelagians, held that the lustful act of conception passed original sin to the baby in the very moment of its coming into existence. He maintained that 'the feebleness of the infant limbs is innocent, not the infant's mind'.<sup>5</sup> He goes on to give the example of a baby who, although incapable of speech, was more than capable of feeling envy, as he contemplated his brother sharing his mother's milk. In this formulation, the child's heart is just as corrupt as the adult's, and lacks only the ability to give outward expression to its sinful nature. And when *pueritia*, the age of speech, succeeds *infantilium* in Augustine's schema of childhood, the sinful soul gains only a better means of exercising its corrupted humanity.

Augustine was pondering Job 14. 4–5, where he read that 'none is pure from sin before you, not even an infant of one day upon the earth',<sup>6</sup> and it would be unfair to reduce his sometimes agonised theology of children to one of complete and wholly developed depravity. In a letter to Jerome, he agonises over the fate of unbaptised infant souls:

where, in the case of infant children, is sin committed by these souls, so that they require the remission of sin in the sacrament of Christ, because of sinning in Adam from whom the sinful flesh has been derived? or if they do not sin, how is it compatible with the justice of the Creator ... that unless they be rescued by the Church, perdition overtakes them, although it is not in their power to secure that they be rescued by the grace of baptism? ...

<sup>4</sup> Goldberg, Riddy, and Tyler, 'Introduction: After Ariès', p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> 'Imbecillitas membrorum infantilium innocens est, non animus infantium'. *St Augustine's Confessions with an English translation by William Watts. 1631*, Loeb Classical Library, 2 vols (London: Heinemann, 1960–61), I, 20; Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> 'Quoniam nemo mundus a peccato coram te, nec infans, cuius est unius diei vita super terram?' Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. by Watts (I, 18–20), trans. by Chadwick (p. 9).

## *Purity and 'Pueritia'*

it is not lawful for us to deny that nothing else than perdition is the doom of souls, even of little children, that have departed from the body without the sacrament.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, despite his heartache over the fate of the unbaptized, Augustine could not escape the conclusion that children were born as inheritors of the sin of Adam, and not as blank slates. Martha Ellen Stortz suggests that 'between innocence and depravity Augustine posed a third possibility: non-innocence.'<sup>8</sup> He maintained that children were born with the seed of original sin in their hearts, that would bud and blossom in due proportion to their competence. However, the earlier church fathers Hermas (whose writings were included in the apocrypha) and Clement of Alexandria, both writing in the late second century, had offered a very different theology of childhood in their concept of *népiotés*, which is defined by Peter Brown as 'the artless simplicity, candor and lack of affectation of the child':

the child before puberty was 'blameless'. He enjoyed without disruption the precious gift of 'singleness of heart', of 'absence of malice'. Sexual urges and sexual imaginings had not yet come to divide his 'face' from his 'heart'. The world of adult cunning, of adult self-interest, and of adult hypocrisy — of which the rise of sexual feeling at puberty was a first, premonitory symptom — had not yet closed in upon him.<sup>9</sup>

*Népiotés* is not a positive quality, but the absence of a negative: it is the opposite of Stortz's 'non-innocence', it is the absence of sin. And it is noticeable how often the word 'absence' is used in these patristic descriptions of childhood. Clement defined *népiotés* as 'the absence of pretence or complication, the absence of duplicity, of cunning or hypocrisy; frankness, sincerity'.<sup>10</sup> Hermas's second mandate similarly defined the innocence of children as the absence of sin: 'have simplicity and be innocent and you shall be as the children who do not know the wickedness that destroys the life of men'.<sup>11</sup> In both, the emphasis is on moral vacuity, not positive purity; neutrality not active virtue. These theologians saw childhood essentially as a pre-sinful age. They took their cue from the words of Christ:

Amen I say to you, unless you be converted, and become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.<sup>12</sup>

Jesus had told the disciples that without an imitation of childlikeness, they were occluded from the kingdom of heaven: there could not be a stronger endorsement of childhood as a blessed state. He did not say that it was because the child was *sinless* that he had this special

<sup>7</sup> Augustine, *Letters of Saint Augustine*, trans. by J. G. Cunningham, 2 vols (Edinburgh: Clark, 1875), ii, 304 (letter 166). 'Ubi in paruulis peccent, ut indigeant in sacramento Christi remissione peccati peccantes in Adam, ex quo caro est propagata peccati, aut, si non peccant, qua iustitia creatoris ita peccato obligantur alieno [...] ut eas, nisi per ecclesiam subuentum fuerit, damnatio consequatur, cum in earum potestate non sit, ut eis possit gratia baptismi subueniri. [...] neque negare fas nobis est eas, quae sine Christi sacramento de corporibus exierint, etiam parvulorum non nisi in damnationem trahi.' *S. Avreli Avgvstini Hipponiensis Episcopi Epistulae*, ed. Alois Goldbacher, *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, 34, 44, 57–58, 5 vols (Vienna: Tempsky, 1895–1923), III 560–61. For a summary of Augustine on this issue, see Martha Ellen Stortz, '“Where or When Was Your Servant Innocent?”: Augustine on Childhood', in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. by Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 78–102 (pp. 78–79).

<sup>8</sup> Stortz, 'Where or When Was Your Servant Innocent?', p. 82.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 127, 70–71 respectively.

<sup>10</sup> 'Absence de prétension ou de complication, absence de détour, du ruse ou d'hypocrisie, franchise, sincérité' (my translation). Clement of Alexandria, *Le Pédagogue*, ed. by Marguerite Harl and Henri-Iréné Marrou, 3 vols (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1960), I, 25.

<sup>11</sup> Hermas, 'The Shepherd of Hermas', in *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. by Kirsopp Lake, 2 vols (London: Heinemann, 1913), II, 71.

<sup>12</sup> 'Amen dico vobis nisi conversi fueritis et efficiamini sicut parvuli non intrabitis in regnum caelorum.' Matthew 18. 3. All biblical quotations from *The Douai-Rheims Vulgate* <<http://www.drbo.org/>> [accessed 25 August 2011].

grace; indeed his words have been interpreted by many Christians as suggesting that it is the incapacity of children to do anything but receive the grace of God freely that makes them the perfect model of repentance, by definition a post-sinful state. However, most medieval readings of this text took it as a straightforward advocacy of the simple, pure, childlike nature.

These contradictory patristic philosophies filtered into the church teaching of the Middle Ages to competing degrees. Isidore of Seville's influential *Etymologiae* (early seventh century) derived the etymology of *puer* from *pur*, constructing a linguistic identity between the concepts of childhood and innocence, a self-authenticating etymological proof alleging the innate purity of children.<sup>13</sup> He defined *pueritia* as the 'pure [*purus*] age, during which a child is not yet suited for procreating.'<sup>14</sup> For Isidore, the child's bodily immaturity mirrored an internal purity in which the temptations of lust were as unimaginable as the procreative act was impossible. He imagined childhood as a state in which both the body and the character were not fully formed, and in which the power of sinful human nature had not yet budded.

Scholastic theologians tempered the Augustinian scheme of childhood with Isidorean purity. In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas stated that 'infants are heirs of Adam's sin, otherwise they wouldn't die. So it was necessary to baptize infants so that those on whom Adam brought damnation at birth might achieve salvation through rebirth through Christ.'<sup>15</sup> For the sacrament of baptism to be efficacious, Aquinas allowed that original sin must be present in the infant; but Aquinas, whose thought was influenced not only by Augustine, but by Aristotle, offered a more developmental understanding of the fallenness of humanity.<sup>16</sup> He followed Augustine in dividing childhood into the three stages of *infantia*, *pueritia* and *adolescentia*: yet where Augustine's categories delineated the limited competence of the child to enact its sinfulness, Aquinas's limited the *sinfulness* of the child. What characterised *infantia* was the inability to reason, and Aquinas held that there was no need for children to receive the sacraments of penance or unction.<sup>17</sup> The child before the age of seven was incapable of mortal sin, and confession and communion did not commence until puberty. The Augustinian schema became, ironically, a measure of declining innocence, and the process of maturity one of increasing sinfulness.

Cristina L. H. Traina, commenting on the paradox of these two patristic theologies of childhood, remarks that 'to adopt an extreme version of either of these convictions would be to choose one of two heretical positions: deterministic nihilism, the belief that the human will is essentially and irretrievably evil and sinful; or Pelagianism, the belief that people are

<sup>13</sup> Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, ed. by Stephen A. Barney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 241 (xi. ii. 10).

<sup>14</sup> 'Pura et necdum ad generandum apta.' *Etymologiarum sive Originum*, ed. by W. M. Lindsay (Oxford: Clarendon, 1911), xi. ii. 2; *Etymologies*, ed. by Barney, p. 241.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation*, ed. and trans. by Timothy McDermott (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1989), p. 565 (lvii, 68: 9). 'Pueri autem ex peccato Adae peccatum originale contrahunt: quod patet ex hoc quod sunt mortalitati subjecti [...] Unde necessarium fuit pueros baptizare, ut, sicut per Adam damnationem incurrerunt nascendo, ita per Christum salutem consequantur renascendo.' *Summa Theologiae: Latin Text and English Translation*, ed. and trans. by James J. Cunningham, 60 vols (London: Blackfriars, 1964–81), LVII, 108.

<sup>16</sup> For a description of Aristotelian philosophies of childhood on medieval theologians, see Orme, *Medieval Children*, pp. 13–15.

<sup>17</sup> For more on Aquinas's theology of childhood, see Cristina L. H. Traina, 'A Person in the Making: Thomas Aquinas on Children and Childhood', in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. by Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 103–33.

## Purity and 'Pueritia'

essentially good.<sup>18</sup> Medieval ecclesiastical teaching on children did hold the two in tension, without pushing either to its natural conclusion. The holy innocents were venerated as infant martyrs, although they were unbaptised — 'Childermas' was celebrated on the 28th December, when a boy-bishop would take part in leading the liturgy, surrounded by a retinue of other boys in clerical clothing. Nicholas Orme records how at this festival in Salisbury, the boy was formally installed and led services and administered blessings; in St Paul's, he preached a sermon; and in other cities boys toured the parish, being feasted by and blessing the people.<sup>19</sup> Children were frequently used as living symbols of purity in church ceremonies. Shulamith Shahar cites the statutes of the Norwich Furriers' Guild, which stipulate that 'the candle in the religious procession shall be borne by an innocent child'.<sup>20</sup> The acolyte encapsulates the reductive symbolism of childhood purity: taken out of a natural context and placed in a ritual one, he becomes purely a symbol for something which has very little to do with real childhood, but everything to do with the spiritualised idealisation of it. The most extreme example of childhood innocence is of course the *puer senex* of hagiography. The child saints are frequently found shunning the frivolous activities of their peers: they lie in their cradles in attitudes of devotion, arms folded and eyes raised heavenward, serious and sad as old men. The infant Nicholas 'in his tendre age' is said to have 'eschewed the vanitees of yonge children',<sup>21</sup> and Gregory wrote that Benedict 'had even from the time of his boyhood the heart of an old man'.<sup>22</sup> In the saints' lives we have children without a childhood, possessing a distinct kind of *népiotés*: gravity beyond their years. In these various literary depictions of childhood innocence, the common thread is negativity: eschewing vanity, avoiding guile, being unable to lie. Rather than finding positive virtue in childhood, the *népiotés* concept and its actualisation in church ritual reads childhood retrospectively, as the unspoiled form of adulthood, as the absence of sin.

## Childhood in vernacular spiritual literature

This archetype was widely influential outside Latinate culture, the subject of popular proverbs, such as 'childerne and fooles can not ly', and often discussed in vernacular religious literature.<sup>23</sup> This section discusses how the patristic paradox was developed by popular vernacular literature, focusing on a carol of the early fifteenth century, by John Audelay:

*And God wold graunt me my prayer,  
A child agene I wold I were!*

<sup>18</sup> Traina, 'A Person in the Making', p. 106.

<sup>19</sup> Orme, *Medieval Children*, pp. 188–89.

<sup>20</sup> Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages*, p. 19.

<sup>21</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, *Gilte Legende*, ed. by Richard Hamer and Vida Russell, Early English Texts Society, o.s., 327–28 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), I, 12.

<sup>22</sup> 'Ab ipso pueritiae suae tempore cor gerens senile.' Gregory, *Dialogues. Tome 2, Livres I–III*, ed. by Adalbert de Vogüé and trans. by Paul Antin, Sources chrétiennes, 260 (Paris: Cerf, 1979), p. 126 (Prologue, 1); trans. by J. A. Burrow, *Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), p. 98.

<sup>23</sup> John Heywood, *A Dialogue of Proverbs*, ed. by Rudolph E. Habench (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), p. 125. See also the Pearl-maiden's defence against the accusation that 'I my peny haf wrang tan': *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. by Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (London: Arnold, 1978), pp. 82 and 85 (ll. 614 and 671–72); and, on the Augustinian side of the issue, the infant protagonist's assertion in *Mundus et Infans* that he was 'gotten in game and in great sin': *Three Late Medieval Morality Plays: Mankind, Everyman, Mundus et Infans*, ed. by G. A. Lester (London: Black, 1981), p. 112.

Joanna Bellis

Fore pride in herte, he hatis alle one;  
Worchip ne reverens kepis he non;  
Ne he is wroth with no mon —  
In chareté is alle his chere!

*And God wold graunt me my prayer,  
A child agene I wold I were!*

He wot never wat is envy;  
He wol uche mon fard wele him by;  
He covetis noght unlauffully —  
Fore cheré stons is his tresoure.

*And God wold graunt me my prayer,  
A child agene I wold I were!*

In hert he hatis lechori —  
To here therof he is sory! —  
He sleth the syn of gloteré,  
Nother etis ne drynkis bot fore mystere.

*And God wold graunt me my prayer,  
A child agene I wold I were!*

Slouth he putis away, algate,  
And wol be besé erlé and late —  
Al wyckidnes thus he doth hate,  
The seven dedlé synus al in fere.

*And God wold graunt me my prayer,  
A child agene I wold I were!*

A gracious lyfe, forsothe, he has —  
To God ne mon doth no trespas —  
And I in syn fal, alas,  
Everé day in the yere!

*And God wold graunt me my prayer,  
A child agene I wold I were!*

My joy, my myrth is fro me clene —  
I turne to care, turment, and tene —  
Ded I wold that I had bene  
When I was borne, and layd on bere —

*And God wold graunt me my prayer,  
A child agene I wold I were!*

Fore better hit were to be unboren,  
Then fore my synus to be forelorne,  
Nere grace of God that is beforne,  
Almysdede, and holé prayere!

*And God wold graunt me my prayer,  
A child agene I wold I were!*

Now other cumford se I non  
Bot schryve me clene with contricion,  
And make here trew satisfaccion,  
And do my penans wyle Y am here —



## Purity and 'Pueritia'

*And God wold graunt me my prayer,  
A child agene I wold I were!*<sup>24</sup>

Little is known of Audelay apart from that which can be gleaned from his fifty-five poems, preserved uniquely in Bodleian Library MS Douce 302. For the most part they are monitory and penitential, lamenting the poet's blindness and deafness, which he understood as a judgment on his sins. The carol espouses a view of children which exemplifies their spiritualised, metaphoric function, framing childhood naïvety within the paradigm of the deadly sins. However, the axes of its contrasts are not really sin and innocence, but knowledge and ignorance: it is not because the child is virtuous that he 'wot never wat is envy', but because his experience has not opened him to the possibility of it. The carol's depiction of innocence is one of profound simplicity. It suggests that children are incapable of committing mortal sin because their experience of the world is insufficient to school them in it. Audelay looks back with wistfulness to a time of life at which the remorse that he feels 'eueré day in þe yere' was not yet possible. His lament, 'a child agene I wold I were', retrospectively imagines a world of simplicity that was impermeable to his darkened adult experience and the temptations of a future age. The manuscript of heading of the carol, *Cantelena de puericia*, locates it specifically in the context of the patristic debate about childhood, and it is the anti-Augustinian counter-strain that is dwelt upon by Audelay. The child of his carol 'wot never wat is envy' and 'hatis lechori' because greed and lust are too sophisticated for him; he 'doth no trespas' because he has not yet learned how. He belongs to a world apart, beyond the reach of sin and its penalty. He is occluded from the realm of adult temptation — and his blessed ignorance becomes a model for Christian adult imitation.

Both the theological models of childhood — somatic sinfulness and innate sinlessness — were current in the vernacular religious culture of the later Middle Ages, neither foreclosing the other. Both also misrepresented childhood by reducing it to its symbolic theological function. It is as idealistic and sentimental (as anyone who knows any children knows!) to say that they are free from the vices of humanity, as it is perverse to ascribe to them the wickednesses of the adult world. However, there is a third and more sophisticated reading of childhood that emerges in the vernacular meditations on the theological symbolism, which locates it between these binaries. In his attempt to characterise *népiotés* as a real child, Audelay hints at a more naturalistic picture, which emerges distinct from his idealisation of negative purity. Alongside the statement that the child has the 'seven dedlé synus al in fere', is the image, 'cheré stons is his tresoure'. The interpretation of the child's simplicity as precocious resistance of sin happens in parallel with the poet's tacit acknowledgment of the casuistry of such a manoeuvre: while he suggests that the child holds the deadly sins 'in fere', 'putis away' sloth and 'hatis lechori', this theologised depiction is undermined by the natural childishness at the heart of the industry which is credited with such spirituality. The child is 'besé erlé and late' — but with 'cheré stons', satisfying his juvenile pleasures, because unaware of any others. Audelay's child may be offered as a spiritual example, but he is also a real child, genuinely and sincerely absorbed in his world of play, and approaching it with no special grace. His cherry stones are not an ascetic

<sup>24</sup> John the Blind Audelay, *Poems and Carols* (Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Douce 302), ed. by Susanna Fein (Kalamazoo, Medieval Institute, 2009), <<http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/fsjac14f.htm>>, carol 14 [accessed: 28 July 2011]. See also *The Poems of John Audelay*, ed. by Ella Keats Whiting, Early English Texts Society, o. s., 184 (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), pp. 197–198 (no 41). See also Michael Bennett, 'John Audelay: Some New Evidence on His Life and Works', *The Chaucer Review*, 16 (1981–82), 344–55; and Susanna Fein, 'Good Ends in the Audelay Manuscript', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 33 (2003), 97–119.

renunciation of riches symbolising spiritual victory over covetousness; they are real riches in a child's world. Attempting to depict genuine childishness, but in a theologically conditioned light, is problematic: Audelay is forced simultaneously to applaud the child for his virtue, and acknowledge that that virtue is unconscious.

Audelay touches upon, but circumnavigates, the problem that is unavoidable and acute for those authors whose writings were directly concerned with the bringing-up of real children. This section has shown how the conflicting theological models problematised the depiction of children in vernacular spiritual literature; the remainder of this article will analyse how the secular courtesy books, responding to the opposing available paradigms of childhood, interrogated this dilemma. They engaged the question of childhood innocence from an utterly different heuristic perspective: practical not spiritual, literal not symbolic. The conflict in the theological literature created a central but sublimated crux in the social literature. Accommodating the spiritual models of childhood was unavoidable, but the courtesy books' mediation shows a fundamental departure from them.

### **The courtesy books: at odds with the spiritual *and* the secular meme**

The literature that was written *for* children and was concerned with the practicalities of their upbringing, rather than recommending to adults the imitation of childlike virtue or spiritualising childhood as an object for Christian imitation, offers an understanding of childhood that is neither somatic corruption nor sentimentalised unspoiledness. The courtesy books and other instructional literature for children negotiate and ultimately reject both doctrinal positions on childhood. It confronts the slovenliness of children that is ignored by the idealising literature, instructing them to behave courteously in a household, not to spit, belch or blow their noses, tear their meat or chew it with open mouths, brandish the bones between their teeth, have dirty nails, scratch their heads, pick their teeth, talk over their superiors, gossip about their peers, or be rude to their servants. Injunctions such as these are commonplace:

Ley not þyne Elbowe nor thy fyst  
Vpon the tabylle þat thou etist,  
Bulk not as a Bene were in þi throte,  
As a karle þat comys oute of a cote.<sup>25</sup>

Belche thou neare to no mans face  
with a corrupt fumositye,  
But turne from such occasion, friend,  
hate such ventositye.<sup>26</sup>

Blow not thy nose, nor looke thereon;  
to most men it is loath.<sup>27</sup>

These admonitions acknowledge the gluttony, unmannerliness and selfishness of children that are no less reprehensible for juvenile. They confront the reality that children are not pure by nature, and need to be educated in clean and courteous habits. Theirs is an ideology focused *upon* social practice, rather than a romanticisation of it: they dwell upon what the exemplary depiction glosses over.

<sup>25</sup> 'The Lytyll Childrenes Lytil Boke', in *The Babees Book*, ed. by F. J. Furnivall, Early English Text Society, o. s., 32 (London: Trübner, 1868), p. 18 (ll. 45–48).

<sup>26</sup> Hugh Rhodes, 'The Book of Nurture', in *The Babees Book*, ed. by F. J. Furnivall, p. 77 (ll. 229–32).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80 (ll. 335–36).

### *Purity and 'Pueritia'*

The style of the courtesy books is simple: they are usually written in rhyming quatrains, sometimes alphabet acrostics, such as 'The a.b.c. of Aristotel'. Caxton stipulates that children 'muste entreyde be | With esy thyng, and not with subtilte',<sup>28</sup> and these poems' style is one of straightforward and mnemonic maxims. Nonetheless, their negotiation of the theme of innocence is a complex one. They cannot but acknowledge the dominant meme of childhood simplicity, yet their changed inflection inverts the theological paradigm: the principal addressee becomes the child, and polished adult behaviour the principal object of emulation. Courteous conduct and perfect manners are the desired object, contrasted with lack of self-control and ignorance of social grace; whereas in the adult literature, childlike lack of affectation is presented as virtuous simplicity and moral probity, in contrast with the secret, sinful soul of the adult reader, concealed behind a front of decorum. The one praises as lack of deception what the other castigates as lack of self-control. Emulation is a key aspect in which the change of addressee makes all the difference. It is not that there is no place for the theme of innocence in the courtesy books, but their scrutiny and correction of actual childish conduct leads them to react against and reframe the available models of it.

This is not to say that the courtesy books are explicit about their rejection of the paradigms of spiritual literature: overtly to contradict Aquinas and Isidore would be too bold a manoeuvre. But they do subtly reverse the direction of the theological discourse. The author of 'The Lytyll Childrenes Lytil Boke', for example, considers the same assertion as Audelay, that the child 'is wroth with no mon', appealing to the well-known archetype in his attempt to encourage children to be 'treatable':

To children it longithe nat to be [vengeable];  
Sone meevd and sone forgyvyng;  
And as it is remembrid bi writyng,  
Wrathe of children is sone ouergone,  
With an apple the parties be made atone.<sup>29</sup>

The theme of innocence is there in the background: 'remembrid bi writyng' suggesting that it is in clerical discourse that the author is familiar with the topos that 'to children it longithe nat to be vengeable'. The theological aspect is not dismissed: it is held up as an ideal, while simultaneously undermined by the fact that the admonition needs to be written at all. There is a certain irony in that the idealisation of children, designed for adults to imitate spiritually, is made into a goal for children to aim at practically. The influence of the ideal child is tangible, even though the author's minute engagement with the undesirable behaviour of the real child subtly undermines any credence that might attach to it. The prevailing characteristics of the real child are temper and contrariety, not sentimentalised amiability. But there is also tenderness in the realism of the characterisation: the statement 'with an apple the parties be made atone', reminiscent of Audelay's 'cheré stons', indicates an appreciation and positive understanding of childishness as a separate category from *népiotés*, innocence as something different from sinlessness, and a genuine simplicity of experience distinct from a religious imitation of it. A similar depiction of play is discernible in the poem 'Ratis Raving':

Sa lang havis child wyl alwaye  
With flouris for to Jap and playe;  
With stikis, and with spalys small,  
To bige vp chalmer, spens & hall.

<sup>28</sup> William Caxton, *The Book of Curtesye*, ed. by F. J. Furnivall, Early English Texts Society, e. s., 3 (London: Trübner, 1868), p. 53 (ll. 524–25).

<sup>29</sup> Anon., 'The Lytyll Childrenes Lytil Boke', in *The Babees Book*, ed. by Furnivall, p. 30 (ll. 80–84).

The ‘flouris’, ‘stikis’ and ‘spalys small’ signify solely within the child’s world of play, rather than being read as symbols in an overlaid interpretation of it. The poet does not praise native childishness as though it were Christian imitative purity. And his verdict on childhood is the more cautious:

This eild is lycht and Innocent,  
 Suppos It want gud Jugment:  
 For-thi I bles it nocht as best,  
 Na ʒit I wary it nocht as verst.<sup>30</sup>

Innocence and ‘gud Jugment’ are two distinct qualities in this literature. The author, as he ponders the patristic terminology, does not equate sinlessness with virtue: *pueritia* is not ‘best’, although neither is it, in the Augustinian formulation, equal with the ‘verst’. In this poem, ‘innocent’ means something very different from ‘sinless’. The author uses the same language as the religious literature, but defines it fundamentally differently. Where religious writers conformed their understanding of the *res* to the *verbum*, the courtesy manuals reappropriate and redefine the theologised concept to fit the reality. The place in the courtesy books where the theme of childhood innocence is most acutely subverted is in the pedagogical poems, ‘How the Wise Man tauʒt His Son’ or ‘How the Good Wijf Tauʒt Hir Douʒtir’. Parental address is a common enough topos to assume that it is indeed a topos, as much as a reality: ‘Ratis Raving’ is written to ‘my gud sone’;<sup>31</sup> Caxton’s ‘lytil Iohn’ is the object of his advice in *The Book of Curtesye*;<sup>32</sup> Chaucer’s ‘lyte Lowys’ is addressed in ‘A Treatise on the Astrolabe’;<sup>33</sup> Geoffrey de la Tour-Landry’s ‘wel bylouyd daughters’ are the intended readers of his collection of cautionary tales, *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*.<sup>34</sup> The form occupies an ambiguous space between the cliché of an established formula and the genuine tenderness of parental address.<sup>35</sup> For example, every stanza of ‘The Good Wif Thought Hir Doughtir’ ends with the refrain, ‘my leue childe’ or ‘my der childe’.<sup>36</sup> The frequency of this appellation makes it formulaic, but its function in the mnemonic structure of the poem does not nullify its authenticity by repetition. Rather its regular punctuation of the otherwise rigid advice to ‘make þou non iangelyng’, ‘laughe þou nocht to lowde’, and ‘go þou nocht to toun’,<sup>37</sup> with a continually and comfortingly repeated note of affection, mixes the tenor of sternness with affection.

In this genre, although innocence is acknowledged, it is not cherished: rather, there is emphatic recommendation to the child to learn the ways of adulthood. The principle that

<sup>30</sup> *Ratis Raving and Other Moral and Religious Pieces, in Prose and Verse*, ed. by J. Rawson Lumby, Early English Texts Society, o. s., 43 (London: Trübner, 1870), pp. 57–58 (ll. 1128–31 and 1142–45).

<sup>31</sup> *Ratis Raving*, ed. by Lumby, p. 26 (l. 15).

<sup>32</sup> Caxton, *The Book of Curtesye*, ed. by Furnivall, p. 45 (l. 435).

<sup>33</sup> Prologue to ‘A Treatise on the Astrolabe’, in Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 662 (l. 1).

<sup>34</sup> Geoffrey De La Tour-Landry, *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, ed. by M. Y. Offord and trans. by William Caxton, Early English Texts Society, s. s., 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 12 (l. 35).

<sup>35</sup> The canonical exemplar of parental advice was of course the end of the book of Proverbs, ‘the words of king Lamuel. The vision wherewith his mother instructed him’ (‘verba Lamuhel regis visio qua eruditit eum mater sua’; Proverbs 31. 1–5), which is similarly frank about the realities of adult temptation. It is no coincidence that elsewhere the book of Proverbs exhibits a similarly pedagogic view of childishness to that expressed by these poets: ‘folly is bound up in the heart of a child, and the rod of correction shall drive it away’ (‘stultitia conligata est in corde pueri et virga disciplinae fugabit eam’; 22. 15; see also 20. 11).

<sup>36</sup> *The Good Wife Taught Her Daughter, The Good Wyfe Wold a Pylgremage, The Thewis of Gud Women*, ed. by Tauno F. Mustanoja, Suomalaisen Tiedeakatemia toimituksia, series B, 61 (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1948), pp. 159–72.

<sup>37</sup> *The Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*, ed. by Mustanoja, pp. 159–61 (ll. 15, 41, and 50).

*Purity and 'Pueritia'*

guides the advice is 'Loke what woman þou wolt be, and theron set thy thowȝt.'<sup>38</sup> Whereas the carol-narrator complains, 'a child aȝene I wold I were', these poems are designed to teach children how to lose their innocence — but to lose it to maturity, and not to sin. In 'The Good Wyfe Wold a Pylgremage', the young girl's sexual innocence is, in one sense, lost, because the wife-narrator seeks to acquaint her with the truth before she learns the hard way:

Doȝttor, seyð þe good wyfe, hyde thy legys whyte,  
And schew not forþ thy stret hossyn, to make men have delytt;  
Thow hit plese hem for a tym, hit schall be thy despytt,  
And men wyll sey of þi body þou carst but lytt.

Lack of experience is figured not as a precious thing to be guarded or emulated, but a dangerous thing, such that the wife concludes,

Better wer a childe vnborn þan vntaught,  
My leue childe.<sup>39</sup>

Audelay's idealisation of a world in which sin has not yet entered is not, in this context, a good thing. When Audelay wished himself 'unboren', it was in order to re-enter a pre-sinful state. But the ignorance he wistfully regretted appears here as a dangerous lack of knowledge: without wisdom, the child is better off 'vnborn'. The wife needs to introduce her daughter to the adult world, even if it involves destroying her innocence, because for better or worse she moves in it. Ignorance, in this literature, is *not* bliss.

Similarly, the father's advice to his son is to recognise and forget the frivolity of his childish pastimes and see the world the way the adult does:

Sonne, sette not bi þis worldis weele,  
For it fariþ but as a cheri faire.<sup>40</sup>

This image is almost the exact reversal of Audelay's, which made the cherry hoard a symbol of the purity and simplicity of the child's uncovetous mind, and held out such a state as the ideal for the aspiring Christian. But to the father, 'cheri faire' represents only transience and immaturity. This phrase, referring to a festival at the time of the cherry harvest, was also a common metaphor for the transience of worldly joys (see the MED definition). The father doesn't sentimentalise the 'cheri faire': his advice to his son is to leave his cherries behind as he adopts a maturer and more pessimistic understanding of the world. This is a long way from the 'cheré stons' as 'tresoure': the child is encouraged to abandon his ephemeral treasure for the sake of treasure in heaven. Rather than celebrating the ingenuousness of play, the poet exhorts the child to forget his foolishness, and to come to a more disillusioned understanding of the ephemerality of the 'worldis weele'. In an exact reversal of Audelay's metaphor, the secular manuals advise that children should learn as soon as possible imitate the adult world.

But they do so not by contradicting but by co-opting the imagery of the spiritual paradigm. Instead of rejecting *népiotés* out of hand, these authors negotiate and accommodate the theme of negative purity. Caxton begins his *Book of Curtesye* by analysing the morality of infancy:

[I]ytl Iohn/ syth your tendre enfancye  
Stondeth as yet vnder, in difference  
To vice or vertu to meyn or applye ...  
But as waxe resseyveth prynte or figure,  
So children ben disposide of nature.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> *The Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*, ed. by Mustanoja, p. 175 (l. 61).

<sup>39</sup> *The Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*, ed. by Mustanoja, pp. 173–74 (ll. 25–28); p. 172 (ll. 208–9).

<sup>40</sup> 'How the Wise Man tauȝt His Son', in *The Babees Book*, ed. by Furnivall, p. 52 (l. 143).

<sup>41</sup> Caxton, *The Book of Curtesye*, ed. by Furnivall, p. 3 (ll. 1–7).

This is very different from the treatment of the same theme in theological literature. Negative innocence, stemming from inexperience, not resistance, of temptation, is still present: the child is like soft wax, able to receive the impression of either ‘vice or vertu’. But Caxton does not use this image to signify the untouched state of sinlessness. Instead, he inverts the theme, using inexperience as the pretext to present adult conduct to children as the object of imitation, rather than childish naïvety as object of imitation to the adult world. Instead of celebrating innocence, these poems provide a practical manual of how to lose it. They explore, deeply and unsentimentally, the native quality of their addressee, not applauding as a spiritual feat the natural condition of being young. They do not despise innocence, but they resist the conflation of ignorance and innocence in their differentiation between sapient virtue and nescient naïvety, between the adult’s informed and active purity and the child’s unconscious purity. They are closer to a different gospel exhortation, one that encompasses shrewdness in its definition of innocence: ‘be ye therefore wise as serpents and simple as doves.’<sup>42</sup>

It is the prevailing ethic of practical morality that differentiates the didacticism of the courtesy books from that of the religious literature. Courtesy and piety may be sister-virtues, but the emphasis of the former is on earthly assimilation and socialisation, and not renunciation of corruptive worldly society. However, the courtesy books still use the language of virtue to categorise the social as the moral. One author calls it ‘honestye’ to ‘eate thy meate somewhat close’: the semantic blending of propriety, decorum, purity, chastity and moral uprightness in this word suggesting a semantic matrix in which moral virtue and social mannerliness collided.<sup>43</sup> The advocacy of courtesy has a fundamental embrace of, not withdrawal from, the world, configuring spirituality within a framework of obeisance and advancement. In this paradigm, heavenly reward is held out to social aspirants, not social ascetics: success lies in learned behaviour and not innate quality. Novices must abandon their rude childish manners and embrace refined adulthood to attain perfection, rather than the other way round. ‘The Babees Book’ concludes with the wish

That thurhe your nurture and youre gouernaunce  
In lastynge blysse yee mowe your self auauce!<sup>44</sup>

It is not that the courtesy literature is unspiritual in its depiction of childhood, but that the promise of ‘lastynge blysse’ coincides with the idea of self-advancement and social harmony. Holiness is presented as something achieved *through* appropriate socialisation, and not the rejection of societal ethics. Part of the mediation of the influential spiritual ideas in this literature is its borrowing and redefinition of the same vocabulary and imagery.

However, in their move from the spiritual to the social, the courtesy books found in social paradigms an equally problematic tendency to overlay the adult world onto the juvenile. By nature, noble children are as unrefined as the base-born, their habits just as vulgar — demonstrated by admonitions against spitting and belching. The final irony, which makes the idea of childhood innocence so problematic for the courtesy manuals, is that secular culture offered a model of childhood that was every bit as problematic as the spiritual one. The courtesy manuals were designed to educate noble children in noble behaviour that *should*, according to courtly literature, have been innate and inalienable; to educate them, in other words, to be what they already were. In the romances, examples abound of lost children whose striking beauty and moral superiority mark them as noble, whether by kinmarks blazoned on

<sup>42</sup> ‘Ergo prudentes sicut serpentes et simplices sicut columbae’; Matthew 10. 16.

<sup>43</sup> Hugh Rhodes, ‘The Boke of Nurture’, in *The Babees Book*, ed. by Furnivall, p. 79 (ll. 299–300).

<sup>44</sup> ‘The Babees Book’, in *The Babees Book*, ed. by Furnivall, p. 9 (l. 216–17).

*Purity and 'Pueritia'*

their body, or by their peculiar dignity and prowess.<sup>45</sup> Nobility, in the romances, is a self-authenticating ontological reality. And just as the religious metaphor of the child exerted a pressure on the reality of social pedagogy, the fictional world of the court exerted a peculiar pressure on its original. Educating the noble child to act as who he innately is (or should be), in the light of the literature of self-evincing legitimacy, is the paradoxical premise of the courtesy writing. Noble by nature, children have to be taught how not to behave '[as a ka]rle þat comys oute of a cote.'<sup>46</sup> The formula 'lerne or be lewde' appears as the title of one poem and is quoted in several others. This paradox is as problematic for the courtesy book authors as the religious concept of *népiotés*. Both secular and sacred literature had a model in which children were pure or noble by nature, and in which their innocence or dignity manifested itself spontaneously and untaught, as the authenticating evidence of their pedigree. Yet those who had the care of real noble children had the difficult job of impressing upon them these expectations while confronting their palpable unreality. Courtesy literature is neither an exclusively sacred nor secular genre: it blends religious and social language, it promises both treasure in heaven with rewards in earth, its instructions are a mixture of moral imperative and social decorum. Yet in both secular and sacred literature the theme of childhood perfection collided with the discrepancy with reality. The paradoxical job of the courtesy literature was to teach noble children how to be *innately* noble; or to teach beings of inherent simplicity how to act without duplicity: to instil the kind of innocence that the very act and necessity of instruction proved not to exist. In this sense, the courtesy manuals, although thoroughly immersed in their culture, were also profoundly counter-cultural, as they negotiated cultural memes that were inherently contradictory.

Moreover, the success of the paradoxical enterprise of teaching noble children to be noble had social ramifications in which pedagogy was certainly implicated: Hugh Rhodes comments, 'by the Chylde yee shall perceiue the disposytion of the Gouernour.'<sup>47</sup> Manners were no casual matter in the networking of the elite: and yet, in instilling them in their charges, teachers had to accommodate the the secular, as well as the sacred models, that held them to be intrinsic. The 'Babees Book' poet writes:

O yonge Babees, whome bloode Royalle  
With grace, Feture, and hye habylite  
Hathe enourmyd, on yow ys that I calle  
To knowe this Book; for it were grete pyte,  
Syn that in yow is sette sovereyne beaute,  
But yf vertue and nurture were withe alle;  
To yow therfore I speke in specyalle,

And nouhte to hem of elde that bene experte  
In governaunce, nurture, and honeste.<sup>48</sup>

The poet contrasts the beauty and ability with which royalty has 'enourmyd' them with the virtue and nurture which have to be acquired: it is a cautiously qualified assertion of what is and isn't innate in the noble child. 'Grace, Feture, and hye habylite', and not to mention 'sovereyne beaute', are innate, the poet allows, although this statement is couched with careful caveats: the assertion 'in yow is sette sovereyne beaute' does not allege beyond all doubt that beauty

<sup>45</sup> See for example *Havelok the Dane*, ed. by G. V. Smithers (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), p. 21 (l. 605).

<sup>46</sup> 'The Lytyll Childrenes Lytil Boke', in *The Babees Book*, ed. by Furnivall, p. 18 (l. 48).

<sup>47</sup> Preface to 'The Boke of Nurture', in *The Babees Book*, ed. by Furnivall, p. 63.

<sup>48</sup> 'The Babees Book', in *The Babees Book*, ed. by Furnivall, p. 1 (ll. 15–23).

is a product of nature and not nurture; and even more ambiguous is the term ‘enourmyd’, meaning ‘ornamented’. Having been *decorated* with the qualities of royalty, then, they are importuned ‘in specyalle’ to *learn* the code of conduct, framed in moral terms: ‘vertue and nurture’, ‘nurture, and honeste.’

And this is the nub of the problem: if the noble child had to acquire its courteous conduct by imitation and instruction, surely the aspiring bourgeoisie could assimilate imitative nobility also — another of the rippling circles of emulation — which undermines the very claim to innate status. This was the question for Caxton, who wrote his prologues ostensibly for an aristocratic readership, yet relied upon and courted the patronage of burghers and merchants. Tracy Adams remarks that the courtesy books were ‘appropriated and re-deployed by non-noble readers for their own self-fashioning’.<sup>49</sup> Throughout the fifteenth century intermarriage between the gentry and lower nobility was increasing, and by the 1430s, £40 per year was enough to qualify for the knighthood: nobility was affordable. Statements such as ‘[thys] booke is not requysyte to every comyn man to have, but to noble gentylnen that by their vertu entende to come and entre into the noble ordre of chyvalry’, and ‘this present booke is not for a rude uplondyssch man to labour therin ne rede it, but onely for a clerke and a noble gentylman’<sup>50</sup> are frequent in Caxton’s prologues and epilogues, and while there is truth in Richard Firth Green’s assessment of them as ‘advertising talk, designed in part to entice non-noble clients with the promise of initiation into aristocratic mysteries’, they also indicate a theoretical crisis over heredity, a need to articulate exclusivity under threat.<sup>51</sup> Caxton, himself an upwardly mobile merchant, advised his son to

Take hede to the norture/ that men vse  
 Newe founde/ or auntyent whether it be,  
 So shal no mon your curtiosye refuse.  
 [...] haunte  
 The guyse of them / that do most manerly.<sup>52</sup>

Copying the breeding of the ‘most manerly’ attains the likeness, if not the birthright, of ‘curtiosye’; and the oblique animadversion that the hallmark conduct of the elite may be either ‘newe founde, or auntyent’ hints that it is indeed a ‘guyse’, not a property. The aspect of social advancement exposes the paradox that the courtesy books have been hedging around from the beginning: that so-called innate behaviour needs to be learned. Caxton’s advice indicates that creating an external impression is the real goal of courteous conduct,

that men may of you saye  
 A goodly chylde.<sup>53</sup>

The courtesy literature preserves the theoretical veneer of innate nobility, but in practice it recognises that social identity is conferred rather than natural; just as it did lip-service to the theological analogue of childhood innocence, while acknowledging its fallacy. Caxton’s ambition for his son is that people will say well of him: the difference between the social classes is principally one of language not of ontology, as Chaucer’s Manciple’s recognises:

Ther nys no difference, trewely,  
 Bitwixe a wyf that is of heigh degree,

<sup>49</sup> Tracy Adams, ‘Noble, wyse and grete lordes, gentilmen and marchauntes: Caxton’s prologues as conduct books for merchants’, *Parergon*, 22 (2005), 53–76 (p. 53).

<sup>50</sup> Epilogue to ‘The Order of Chualrye’ and Prologue to ‘Eneydos’, from William Caxton, *Caxton’s Own Prose*, ed. by N. F. Blake (London: Deutsch, 1973), p. 126 (ll. 6–9); p. 80 (ll. 68–70).

<sup>51</sup> Richard Firth Green, *Poets and Princepleasers: Literature and the Court in the Late Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), p. 159.

<sup>52</sup> Caxton, *The Book of Curtesye*, ed. by Furnivall, p. 45 (ll. 436–38 and 449–50).

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9 (ll. 69–70).



### *Purity and 'Pueritia'*

If of hir body dishonest she bee,  
And a povre wenche, oother than this —  
If it so be they werke bothe amys —  
But that the gentile, in estaat above,  
She shal be cleped his lady, as in love;  
And for that oother is a povre womman,  
She shal be cleped his wenche, or his lemman.<sup>54</sup>

The difference between a *lady* and a *lemman*, a *wyf* and a *wenche*, is one of register: linguistic stratification is the henchman of social differentiation, and as much as the Manciple protests himself a 'boystous' man for whom word and deed possess an integrity free from such euphemistic relabelling, there *is* a 'difference'. The problem of having to *seem* what you *are* is that people are defined by language, and the familiar categories of word and thought that classify and contain social experience. The authors of the courtesy books are forced to accommodate both the myth that noble identity is integral and the reality that it is socially conferred: to labour under a mirage of semantic and social identity held to be referential and essential, while in practice universally understood to be relational and conditioned.

Archetypal presentations of childhood innocence, therefore, were confronted by literature that addressed itself directly to children. Its conception of childhood is complicated not only by the pedagogic imperative to correct the kind of behaviour that proves innocence not to be intrinsic, but by the social pressure to pretend that such correction is unnecessary. Both the secular and the spiritual models were at odds with the courtesy authors' understanding of the reality of childhood, yet both were too prevalent to be easily rejected. As a result, the paradox at the heart of courtesy literature is left largely unspoken. In the final analysis, it is appropriate that the problem is essentially one of textual decorum, saying something that can't be said and acknowledging something that can't be acknowledged, in the schooling of children in behaviours that they must simultaneously somehow pretend were completely natural.

## **Conclusion**

This article has argued both that religious and secular literature had models of childhood innocence that were incommensurable with the reality of childhood experience, and that the response of medieval children's literature was subtle and pragmatic. With the reversal of the addressee, theme became anti-theme. The allegorised and idealised image of childhood was the pretext for the pedagogic exhortations of 'kembe your hede' and 'purge your nose'.<sup>55</sup> Ironically, these ostensibly lowly texts expose some of the absurdities and inconsistencies of the august adult literature. The very fact of their composition involved a rebuttal of the sentimentalisation of childhood innocence, but instead of articulating this rebuttal explicitly, the courtesy authors adopt it as part of their complex ethic of emulation. The perfect children of hagiography and romance are co-opted as objects of emulation for real children, in a circular cultural matrix which had originally made them objects of adult imitation themselves. With appropriate irony, it is by carefully hedged deference to these dominant theological and social models that the allegedly unsophisticated texts expose something that we knew all along — that the symbol is always a simplification of the original.

<sup>54</sup> Chaucer, 'The Manciple's Tale', in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson, pp. 284–85 (ll. 212–20).

<sup>55</sup> Caxton, *The Book of Curtesye*, ed. by Furnivall, p. 7 (ll. 36–39).