1. ‘A Prospect of Flowers’

Concepts of Childhood and Female Youth in Seventeenth-Century British Culture

Margaret Reeves

Abstract

This analysis of cultural constructions of childhood and female youth in early modern English literature reveals diverse perspectives on the child’s moral nature evident in three distinct ideas of childhood. Puritan writers frequently instructed their young readers about the problems arising from inherent corruption, while poets such as Henry Vaughan and Thomas Traherne re-imagine childhood by situating it within a framework of innocence. These poets anticipate Wordsworth’s Neoplatonic conception of a child whose alignment with divinity bestows power and agency. This proto-Romantic conception, when inflected by gender as happens in some of Andrew Marvell’s lyric poetry, offers a distinctive space for re-imagining female youth, and an illuminating contrast to the less adequate version of innocence granted to Milton’s youthful Eve.

Keywords: youth; childhood; girlhood; innocence; proto-Romantic; *Paradise Lost*; Wordsworth; Marvell

It is a truth universally acknowledged that certain claims about pre-modern childhood and parent–child relations made by Philippe Ariès and Lawrence Stone are insupportable given the abundant evidence to the contrary.[1] The most troubled issue concerns whether a concept of childhood as a distinctive phase of life was possible in early modern culture. Working largely with French materials, Ariès advanced the now (in)famous claim that no idea of childhood existed prior to the seventeenth century (5). Stone, writing

1 Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*; Stone, *Family, Sex and Marriage*.

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about early modern England, made complementary assertions that clear distinctions between childhood and adulthood would not emerge until the eighteenth century (410), and that high mortality rates in childhood played a role in delaying this understanding (249). Using varieties of evidence, including texts by parents writing to and about their children, scholars of both the medieval and the early modern have hotly disputed these hypotheses.[2] Nevertheless, such debates have productively generated new areas of inquiry on the history of ideas of childhood in Western culture.[3]

These debates have prompted reconsideration of a set of deeply naturalized assumptions about childhood. Recent cultural studies criticism posits that childhood is not a natural state – as Simone de Beauvoir said of womanhood – but is instead a socially, historically, and culturally constructed idea.[4] In the seventeenth century, childhood as an idea was in flux, with multiple concepts in circulation. One concept, mentioned by Stone, derives from early modern beliefs in astrology that assume a person's character is governed by planetary configurations at birth or conception (406). A second, equally individualistic as well as biologically determinist view holds that a balance of fluids in the body determines one's disposition, an idea with roots in Galenic teachings on the four humours that also accounts for changes in temperament as people age.[5] Neither of these approaches to the question of human nature, then, proposes a distinct essence or set of attributes identifying childhood as a separate stage of life distinguishing it from adulthood.

In England, an historically important notion of children as inherently prone to sin from birth pervades Puritan culture and shapes the literary works that Puritan writers aimed at child readers. The basis for this pessimistic view is Calvin's *Institution of Christian Religion*:

> [E]ven infants bring their condemnation with them from their mother's womb; for although they have not yet brought forth the fruits of their unrighteousness, they have its seed included in them. Nay, their whole nature is, as it were, a seed of sin, and, therefore, cannot but be odious and abominable to God.[6]

2 See for example, Ben-Amos, *Adolescence and Youth*, 6; Laurence, *Women in England*, 90; and Tancke, *Bethinke Thy Selfe*, 76.

3 For a summary of Ariès's significance, see Heywood, 'Centuries of Childhood'; and Cunningham, *Children and Childhood*, 1–17.

4 Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 267.

5 Stone, *Family, Sex and Marriage*, 406; and Burrow, *Ages of Man*, 12.

6 Calvin, *Institution of Christian Religion*, 1039.

The idea of infant depravity that follows from Calvinism's stance on human nature is diametrically opposed to the early twenty-first century default view of childhood innocence,[7] but had a strong impact on Puritan parents in early modern England. For example, Elizabeth Joscelin writes to her unborn child that, 'The diuells malice is as easily perceyved for euen now he lyes lurkinge ready to catche euery good motion from th[y] hart'.[8] Joscelin grounds her advice in the belief that innate corruption requires serious attention from infancy.

This Puritan idea of childhood – based on a Calvinist notion of innate corruption – inspired a body of literature in English that was distinctive in being marketed directly to children, portraying youthful rather than adult protagonists and narrators, and addressing child readers directly as sinners responsible for their own salvation.[9] Other literary genres, such as fables, chapbooks, advice books, and conduct manuals, were read by children, even though not always written specifically for them. Seventeenth-century Puritan writers, however, created this distinct body of works that situate a child's experience as a central focus for its target audience and, through these writings, produce an idea of childhood that remains an important legacy of the period. For example, John Cotton's *Milk for Babes* (1646) encourages its youthful readers to internalize this idea through the question-and-response structure of the catechism. In replying to questions about his moral nature, the child respondent confirms his 'corrupt nature is empty of Grace, bent unto sinne, and onely unto sinne, and that continually' (A2v). Rereading as well as memorizing the responses invites young readers to recognize themselves as innately sinful beings. Similarly, the 'awakened' child in John Bunyan's *A Book for Boys and Girls* (1686) laments that 'I was in sin conceived' and at birth, 'I was with filth bespaked' (4–6). Unlike the prescriptive literature inscribing modes of conduct for female and male youths in circulation at this time, distinctions between genders in these Puritan texts are less pronounced. Belief in innate depravity is a powerful equalizer, with distinctions in representations of gender taking second place to the insistence that young readers self-identify as sinners who must work for their own salvation.

Similarly, in *A Token for Children* (1676), James Janeway informs his readers that they are utterly corrupt in nature, and that the child who plays is the Devil's child, while the one who prays is God's.[10] Nevertheless, Janeway's

7 The modern notion of childhood innocence has been the subject of considerable debate in contemporary childhood studies. See, for example, Jenkins, 'Childhood Innocence', discussed below.

8 Joscelin, *Mothers Legacy*, 62.

9 Demers, *From Instruction to Delight*, 41–42.

10 Janeway, *Token for Children*, 9r.

gentle tone, addressing his readers as 'my dear Lambs' in a narrative that recounts the conversions and deaths of Puritan children, takes them seriously as subjects with affective capacities that are worthy of attention. The stories of heroic child protagonists whose 'joyful deaths' are deemed exemplary situate them as active agents whose piety is illustrative of their own salvation. Whether Janeway's use of such terms of endearment in addressing his youthful readers is genuine or strategic (or both), his tone hints at a measure of ambivalence around the hard-line conception of infant depravity typically presented in Puritan children's literature.

A blend of affection and insistence on innate corruption likewise informs Anne Bradstreet's poetry referencing children and childhood. The voice of the child speaker in the section entitled 'Childhood' from 'The Four Ages of Man' (1650) laments 'AH me! conceiv'd in sin, and born in sorrow', an acknowledgement of depravity that the child must 'with shame conceal' (43).[11] Yet intriguingly, Bradstreet taps into a discourse of childhood innocence in the same poem, for this young speaker finds protection from moral corruption in his inexperience with the more serious concerns of adulthood: 'I gave no hand, nor vote, for death, or life', but rather, 'Where e're I went, mine innocence was shield' (44). This poem tempers its investment in the notion of infant depravity, revising its Calvinist perspective by construing its ignorance of the ways of the world as youthful innocence.

Historians single out John Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) as an important touchstone in the historiography of childhood for two reasons: first, the idea of childhood formulated in this treatise is diametrically opposed to the Puritan view, and second, Locke envisions a more radical separation from adulthood by describing children as strangers to the adult world. Historians of childhood trace a line from Locke's notion of the child's mind and character as an intellectual and moral *tabula rasa* whose development depends on careful management by an adult instructor; to the utopian idea of children as innately good but lacking in the capacity to reason expounded by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in reaction to Locke; and, finally, to the Romantic poets, especially William Wordsworth, who is thought to have been largely influenced by Rousseau but takes his ideas further in producing an idealized conception of childhood that aligns it with divinity.[12]

This trajectory needs revision because it discounts the historical importance of other ideas of childhood circulating in the seventeenth

11 Bradstreet, *Tenth Muse*, 41–55.

12 See, for example, Cunningham, *Children and Childhood*, 58–70; and Heywood, *History of Childhood*, 23–27.

and eighteenth centuries. Puritan children's literature is often dismissed by historians of the genre as too stridently didactic. However, the idea of childhood produced within this body of writing is important not only for the seventeenth century, but also for its ongoing influence in subsequent periods. Puritan works for children were republished throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and both Patricia Demers and M.O. Grenby illustrate the way a Calvinist insistence on infant depravity shaped evangelical writings for children well into the Victorian period.[13]

The evolutionary trajectory assigned to ideas of childhood often excludes what I call a proto-Romantic aesthetic of childhood circulating in some seventeenth-century lyric poetry. The term 'proto-Romantic' refers to an idea of childhood that anticipates the influential Romantic notion given prominence in Wordsworth's poetry, and in particular, in his 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood' (1807). The impact of this poem on Victorian and early twentieth-century cultural constructions of childhood is, according to Hugh Cunningham, 'difficult to exaggerate'.[14] I will show first that a proto-Romantic idea of childhood is evident well before Locke and Rousseau composed their influential tracts on education in 1693 and 1762 respectively. Then I will argue that this pre-Lockean concept has implications for an understanding of how gender inflects early modern ideas of childhood and female youth during the seventeenth century.

The key differences between Wordsworth's idea of childhood and those of his immediate predecessors in the eighteenth century lie in his attribution of divine agency to the imagined child figure. Wordsworth's 'Ode' elevates the child's moral nature well beyond the secular notion of the blank slate proposed by Locke or the largely secular idea promoted in Rousseau's depiction of Émile, whose natural goodness consists of an absence of evil at birth and an inability to conceive of evil or to act on it during boyhood. The moral innocence that Locke and Rousseau associate with childhood is inherently precarious, since it is preserved only by taking energetic measures to protect the child from corruptive influences. Wordsworth's 'Ode', on the other hand, envisions a child born 'not in utter nakedness / But trailing clouds of glory do we come / From God, who is our home' (63–65). This child views the

13 Grenby, *Child Reader*, 85–91. See Demers's discussion in *From Instruction to Delight* of the role played by evangelical writers such as Hannah More and Mary Martha Sherwood in the Sunday School movement at the turn of the nineteenth century, 235–38.

14 Cunningham, *Children and Childhood*, 69. Wordsworth composed the 'Ode' between 1802 and 1804, publishing it in 1807. Passages quoted from this and all other poems are cited parenthetically in the text by line number.

world around him as if it were '[a]pparelled in celestial light' (4) because 'Heaven lies about us in our infancy' (66). In attributing spiritual purity to early childhood, the 'Ode' offers a much more elevated conception of goodness than is found in Locke or Rousseau. The child of the 'Ode' is born not naked, which is to say not weak, because he is clothed in the remnants of a heavenly existence that reinforce his divine aspect and subsequently enhance his visual and intuitive perceptions of the world. The poem links the child's spiritual purity to his intellectual powers, as '[t]hou best Philosopher' (110), 'Mighty Prophet', and 'Seer blest' (114) whose 'exterior semblance doth belie / Thy Soul's immensity' (108–09). The powerful childhood subjectivity constructed here is, thus, a source for knowledge about nature, the divine, and the poet's own adult self. The 'Ode' traces the healing influence of these recollections of early childhood through which the adult persona is able to reanimate his creative powers. Finding these powers diminished, he grieves in recognition of what he has lost, yet finds renewal through a nostalgic recovery of a childhood perspective that heals and empowers him. This Romantic idea of childhood, then, exudes agency derived from its moral, spiritual, and aesthetic power, and demonstrated in its ability to heal and rejuvenate the melancholic adult persona.

The idea of childhood created in Wordsworth's 'Ode' is fashioned from a complex mix of pastoral aesthetics, pantheistic views of divinity, and an idea of spiritual purity based on an Edenic notion of pastoral innocence infused with Neoplatonic notions of reincarnation. This extraordinarily powerful idea of childhood is sometimes confused with the modern notion of childhood innocence. For example, in his discussion of this concept's 'lost histories', Robert A. Davis proposes a genealogy of childhood innocence that reaches back to the early medieval period and persists until the present day, with the Romantic poets positioned as important stages along the journey taken by, as Davis puts it, 'this version of innocence' (386). However, Davis fails to account for the substantial differences between the more complex Romantic idea of childhood empowered by its proximity to divinity, and the late twentieth-century myth of childhood innocence. According to Henry Jenkins, this modern idea of childhood innocence has taken on the status of a cultural myth that 'transforms culture into nature'. This mythology of innocence, Jenkins contends, exaggerates the vulnerability and weakness of children beyond infancy, carefully polices and limits their access to knowledge, and denies their capacity as active agents.[15] The argument I present below accepts

15 Davis, 'Brilliance of a Fire', 379; Jenkins, 'Childhood Innocence', 15.

distinctions that are elided in Davis's genealogy. My focus, for the most part, is on the more powerful, Romantic idea of childhood presented so forcefully in Wordsworth's 'Ode'. I argue that this idea has a longer history than is currently recognized, with its roots observable in an imaginative construction of childhood circulating more than a century earlier in seventeenth-century lyric poetry.

Resemblances between Wordsworth's poetry and the work of the seventeenth-century metaphysical poet, Henry Vaughan, have been identified, although the issue of direct influence remains open to question.[16] For my purposes, what is of most importance are their shared interests in the act of recollection and the association of early childhood with divine goodness. For example, one of the most distinctive features of Wordsworth's Ode is its Neoplatonic emphasis on the pre-existence of the soul:

> Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
> The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
> Hath had elsewhere its setting,
> And cometh from afar. (58–61)

The speaker recovers through the act of recollection not merely a sense of the child's pre-existence, but its affinity with divine power. In Vaughan's 'The Retreate' (1650), the speaker undertakes a similarly nostalgic act of recollection in his yearning 'to travell back / […] That I might once more reach that plaine, / Where first I left my glorious traine' (21–24). As in Wordsworth's 'Ode', 'The Retreate' enacts nostalgic yearning, in the process establishing and idealizing childhood as a distinct stage of life:

> Happy those early dayes! when I
> Shin'd in my Angell-infancy.
> Before I understood this place
> Appointed for my second race. (1–4)

The association between infancy and spiritual purity noted above in Wordsworth's 'Ode' is anticipated here. Another poem by Vaughan, entitled 'Childe-hood' (1655), takes issue with the competing 'Hell-fire and brimstone'

16 In an essay published in 1922, L.R. Merrill shows how Wordsworth's 'Ode' is directly indebted to Vaughan. Merrill's claim that Wordsworth owned a copy of Vaughan's collected poems, *Silex Scintillans* (1650; 2nd edition 1655), is, however, disputed in later scholarship. See Merrill, 'Vaughan's Influence', 96; Seelig, *Shadow of Eternity*, 184; and Wu, *Wordsworth's Reading*, 263.

(11), Calvinist view of infant depravity, instead situating childhood as a lost state of which he can only catch a glimpse, although his 'striving eye / Dazles at it, as at eternity' (1–2). Vaughan's speaker sees early childhood as a state both desirable and unreachable, a situation mirrored in the solution Wordsworth's speaker expresses in regard to his melancholia. His 'Ode' identifies a lack of vision as an acute problem confronting the adult speaker:

> The glory and the freshness of a dream.
> It is not now as it hath been of yore;–
> Turn wheresoe'er I may,
> By night or day.
> The things which I have seen I now can see no more. (5–9)

The nostalgic longing to return to early childhood in Vaughan's poetry is reformulated here by Wordsworth as a desire to reclaim the visionary power of the child. This act of recollection ultimately relieves the adult persona's psychological and emotional distress. As in Wordsworth's poem, Vaughan's speaker studies childhood, to 'scan / Thee, more than ere I studyed man ('Childe-hood', 39–40). Vaughan's poem constructs an idea of childhood as an entirely distinct phase of life from adulthood, a view that is usually thought to have emerged in Locke and Rousseau, and, more importantly, sees childhood as a state of being worthy of both admiration and careful scrutiny.

The poetry of one of Vaughan's immediate successors, Thomas Traherne (*c.* 1637–1674), similarly cultivates a proto-Romantic idea of childhood.[17] The association of infancy with an inherited spirituality found in Vaughan's 'The Retreate' is echoed in Traherne's 'Wonder':

> How like an Angel came I down!
> How bright are all things here!
> When first among His works I did appear
> O how their Glory me did crown! ('Wonder', 1–4)

17 Traherne, *Poetical Works*, 4–13; and Traherne, *Poems of Felicity*, 111–12. The question of a direct relationship between Traherne and Wordsworth remains unresolved. Although Traherne's poems were not published until the early twentieth century, the remarkable correspondences in thought and forms of expression between their respective poems on childhood – especially evident when comparing Traherne's 'Walking' to Wordsworth's 'Ode' – suggest some familiarity by Wordsworth with the earlier poet's works.

Traherne, with greater certainty than Vaughan, invokes a pre-existent entity whose inherent nature is angelic; further on, the poem clarifies that the divine spirit is the source of the child's power:

> And while my God did all his Glories show,
> I felt a vigour in my sense
> That was all Spirit. ('Wonder', 19–21)

The Neoplatonism, the blanket of divinity, and the enhanced visual acuity that are so central to Wordsworth's 'Ode' are expressed in these lines from Traherne's 'Wonder'. As with Vaughan, the act of recollection, of remembering, which involves reconstructing the idea of the child through a nostalgic lens, informs Traherne's poem 'Innocence'. Here, the speaker recalls that 'all my soul was full of light', and that 'A joyful sense and purity / Is all I can remember' (8–10). Traherne, like the later Romantic poets, idealizes early childhood as an Edenic state of innocence distinct from the poet's adult self (an approach also explored in Traherne's poem 'Eden'). In 'Innocence', the speaker's visual perception is enhanced by a light emanating from a divine source, with his adult self deriving strength from that recollected idea of a child,

> Whose strength and brightness so do ray,
> That still it seems me to surround;
> What ere it is, it is a light
> So endless unto me
> That I a world of true delight
> Did then and to this day do see. (43–48)

The anticipation of Wordsworth here is apparent, although this child is not as powerful a visionary as the 'Mighty Prophet' and 'Seer blest' (114) imagined in the 1807 'Ode'. And, like Wordsworth, Traherne attributes divine knowledge to childhood, expressed more directly in 'Wonder':

> The stars did entertain my sense,
> And all the works of God, so bright and pure,
> So rich and great did seem,
> As if they ever must endure
> In my esteem. (12–16)

Here, the child's understanding, his 'sense', allows access to knowledge of all creation, with its divine origins affirmed in his assertion that 'I nothing

in the world did know / But 'twas divine' (23–24). Traherne's recollections of his early years in *Centuries of Meditations* evoke similar affinities between childhood and divinity:

> Certainly Adam in Paradise had not more sweet and curious apprehensions of the world than I when I was a child. […] All appeared new […]. My knowledge was Divine. I knew by intuition those things which since my Apostacy I collected again by the highest reason. My very ignorance was advantageous. I seemed as one brought into the Estate of Innocence.[18]

Incorporating, like Vaughan, a response to Calvinist notions of the child's innate sinfulness, the speaker in 'Wonder' at once denies knowledge of evil and asserts unmediated access to divine knowledge.

A more remarkable foreshadowing of Wordsworth's 'Ode' occurs in Traherne's poem, 'Walking', which illustrates the poet's capacity to recall childhood pleasures by tracing how memories can move simultaneously across both space and time:

> Observe those rich and glorious things,
> The rivers, meadows, woods, and springs,
> The fructifying sun;
> To note from far
> The rising of each twinkling star
> For us his race to run.
> A little child these well perceives,
> Who, tumbling in green grass and leaves,
> May rich as kings be thought,
> But there's a sight
> Which perfect manhood may delight,
> To which we shall be brought. (37–48)[19]

The landscape of 'meadow, grove, and stream' that provides the opening image in Wordsworth's 'Ode' (1), repeated in its final stanza as 'Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves' (187); the image of a rising star in the Ode's fifth

18 Traherne, *Centuries*, 156–57.

19 Traherne's 'Wonder', 'Innocence', and 'Eden' were first printed in *The Poetical Works of Thomas Traherne*, edited by Dobell, in 1903. Citations of these poems are from this edition. Traherne's 'Walking' was printed in *Poems of Felicity*, edited by Bell. Citations from this poem are from the version edited by Endicott in *Representative Poetry Online*.

stanza (59); the mention of 'Another race' having been run in the Ode's final stanza (199); and the lost pleasures 'Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower' in the 'Ode' (178) collectively reflect the perceptions and movements of the symbolic child in the passage cited above from Traherne's poem. Indeed, the affinities between Wordsworth's and Traherne's notions of childhood are striking, and confirm the presence of a proto-Romantic aesthetic in the earlier poet's notion of the emotional, cultural, and epistemological function of this idea of childhood.

Both Traherne's and Vaughan's poems engage in a nostalgic reconstruction of a poetic subjectivity achieved by situating childhood as an idealized remembered state, thereby giving voice to an idea whose cultural power derives from its association with divinity and its location as a potent source of pleasure and reassurance for the adult speaker engaged in the act of recollection. The key difference between Traherne and Wordsworth is the former's emphasis on simplicity as a prominent attribute of his idea of childhood, as opposed to Wordsworth's emphasis on its complexity. Traherne pays less attention to the potential for empowerment already inherent in his idea of childhood.

This proto-Romantic idea of childhood, infused by notions of innocence, provides an instructive historical and conceptual framework through which we can explore representations of female youth in another, more celebrated strain of seventeenth-century lyric poetry by John Donne, Andrew Marvell, and Thomas Carew. Their metaphysical lyrics take inspiration from the figure of the female youth on the cusp of or just beyond pubescence, with the question of innocence and its potential loss through sexual experience positioned as the source of much of the emotional, intellectual, and ethical tension generated within the *carpe diem* topos. That is to say, to approach definitions of childhood and youth from a proto-Romantic perspective incorporating divine innocence rather than through a Calvinist notion of infant depravity, or, alternatively, through the more tightly scripted dictums of conduct books, can reshape interpretations of the early modern masculine poet's engagement with the concept of female youth. In the rest of this essay, I will examine the ways in which concepts of female youth are in play in this culturally significant stream of poetry.

Female youth has until recently been largely a category in search of a definition. As noted in the introduction to this volume, Juan Luis Vives' *Instruction of a Christian Woman* sees females as either virgins, wives, or widows, and this triad is further reduced to two options in T.E.'s *The Lawes Resolution of Women's Rights*, which categorizes females as either married or to be married. There is no temporal or conceptual space made available

in such formulations for a definite, distinctive period of adolescence after girlhood but before full adulthood, even though the more common age of first marriage in seventeenth-century England was the mid-twenties rather than during adolescence.[20] Donne reproduces this erasure of a transitional period between childhood and womanhood in his poem 'Epithalamion Made at Lincoln's Inn' (1633).[21] This poem's celebration of marriage compresses the movement from girlhood to womanhood into one day in the refrain repeated at the end of the first four of the poem's eight verse paragraphs, that she will '*Today put on perfection, and a woman's name*' (12, 24, and 36), with the last iteration of the refrain intensifying this effect by shifting into the present tense: today she '*puts on perfection*' (48) [emphasis in original]. The 'fair Bride' (2) is a 'sober virgin' (33), one of the 'Daughters of London' (13) honoured as 'angels, [who] yet still bring with you / Thousands of angels on your marriage days' (15–16). Girlhood is portrayed here as a state of collective angelic innocence, although lacking the divinely endowed agency associated with the proto-Romantic conception expressed later in Vaughan's and Traherne's figurations of childhood. The rapidity of the transition from girlhood to wifehood is accelerated in the last four verse paragraphs when the first word of the closing refrain is recast from '*Today*' to say she will '*Tonight*' acquire this state of perfection, '*and a woman's name*' (60, 72, 84, 96). The length of time during which the transition to adulthood takes place is reduced further as the poem progresses, from one day, to one night, and, ultimately, to one moment in the remarkably violent imagery symbolically figuring the moment of consummation as a form of biblical sacrifice:

> So, she a mother's rich style doth prefer,
> And at the Bridegroom's wished approach doth lie,
> Like an appointed lamb, when tenderly
> The priest comes on his knees t'embowel her. (87–90)

The transition from a state of childhood innocence – implied in the image of the lamb – to a post-nuptial state of womanhood is figured as a sudden, violent, but necessary sacrifice of childhood innocence. The sharp division drawn by Donne between prepubescent childhood and post-pubescent

20 In their study, *Women in Early Modern England*, Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford demonstrate that child marriages were 'the exception rather than the rule by the seventeenth century', 112. See also Julie Hardwick's essay in this volume for the average age of first marriage in England.

21 Donne, *Complete English Poems*, 133–35.

womanhood occludes the idea of female youth, and, as in Vives' tract and the *Lawes Resolutions*, eliminates the conceptual space that an idea of female youth might occupy.

Unlike Donne, Marvell's poetic treatment of female youth enables such a conceptual space to exist. The proto-Romantic aesthetic discussed above provides a useful context for reconsiderations of Marvell's poem 'The Picture of Little T.C. in a Prospect of Flowers' (1681).[22] The opening lines of the poem emphasize T.C.'s 'simplicity', situating her in what the title presents as a 'Prospect of Flowers' that is evocative of the affinity between childhood and nature evident in Vaughan's and Traherne's poems. Moreover, as Diane Purkiss observes, T.C.'s situation resonates with John Milton's portrayal of prelapsarian Eve in Book 5 of *Paradise Lost* (1674), when Eve tends her flowers while Adam speaks at length with Raphael.[23] The power that Little T.C. assumes in the garden – taming the wild flowers (5), 'giv[ing] them names', and telling them 'What colour best becomes them, and what smell' (8) – compares to Eve's claim of propriety over Eden's flowers. Upon learning of her expulsion, Eve indicates it is her flowers she will miss the most, 'which I bred up with tender hand / From the first op'ning bud, and gave ye names (11.276–77). As with the prototypical romantic child, Alice, in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871) – whose wish that the flowers could talk is unexpectedly granted – the connections made in these poems between females and floral beauty signal a latent potency in such conceptualizations of female youth.[24]

Recontextualizing 'Little T.C.' within a proto-Romantic aesthetic of childhood can augment other readings of Marvell's poem that are troubled by what has been called the 'eerie eroticism' of his ironic application of Petrarchan tropes to portrayals of prepubescent girlhood.[25] Yet Marvell's poem carefully anticipates rather than dramatizes erotic desire where the speaker predicts that 'chaster Laws' shall the 'wanton Love [...] one day fear, / And, under her command severe, / See his Bow broke and Ensigns torn' (11–14). The female youth's incipient erotic power is similarly cast in future tense in the third stanza, where the speaker plans to 'in time compound,

22 Marvell, *Poems of Andrew Marvell*, 114–15.

23 Purkiss, 'Marvell, Boys, Girls', 185. Purkiss demonstrates T.C.'s affinity with Milton's portrayal of Eve in the Garden of Eden, and Mandy Green in *Milton's Ovidian Eve*, 133, observes that Eve is linked more closely than Adam to the flowers and fruits of Eden. See, for example, Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 4.708–10; 5.331–49; 8.44–47; and 11.273–85. We learn in Book 11.276–77 of *Paradise Lost* that it is Eve rather than Adam who has named the flowers.

24 Carroll, *Looking-Glass*, 199.

25 Spiegelman, *Wordsworth's Heroes*, 50; see also Purkiss, 'Marvell, Boys, Girls'.

/ and parley with those conquering Eyes; / Ere they have try'd their force to wound' (17–19). The irony in Marvell's deployment of Petrarchan tropes relies on the recognition, by both the male speaker and the reader, that Little T.C. has not yet taken on that role, and thus remains unaware of the power she will one day have 'to wound' (19).

Purkiss examines the ethical landscape around Marvell's use of these tropes in a poem about a girl, and concludes that the poem is more symbolic than erotic, because its ultimate focus is its exploration of the male poet's relationship to adult masculinity rather than to a real girl. Marvell desires, Purkiss argues, 'a moment prior to [the] genesis of masculinity' (181). Yet Purkiss's analysis highlights the careful ethical navigation under way here. In this respect, the poem is caught within a network of contested relations that inevitably emerge between adult authors and their fictional children. Jacqueline Rose argues that adults writing about childhood are inevitably writing about themselves, that innocence is not 'a property of childhood but [...] a portion of adult desire', and that when adults write for or about the child, they create an idea that they desire but can never access in the world outside the text.[26] In 'Little T.C.', I argue, Marvell is writing less about a real child than about a fictive idea with which he is experimenting.[27] This notion is one I have identified above as a proto-Romantic conception of childhood already in circulation in seventeenth-century lyric poetry.

Marvell's portrayal of 'Little T.C.', given its association with a seventeenth-century proto-Romantic aesthetic of childhood, offers a refreshing departure from the heavy didacticism of the prescriptive literature written for young females during the early modern period, and from the misogynist literature that assumes an inherent corruption essential to female beings.[28] Marvell's interest in the conceptual space occupied by female youth, however, still raises questions about the way he positions his adult male speaker in relation to female youth as a focus of desire. In his edition of Marvell's poetry, Nigel Smith situates another such poem, entitled 'Young Love' (1681), within a classical form of poetic predation by older males expressing amatory desire for children and youths, citing Carew's 'The Second Rapture' (1640) as

26 Rose, *Case of Peter Pan*, xii.

27 In his commentary on the poem, Marvell's editor, Nigel Smith, proposes the daughter of one of Marvell's acquaintances as the poem's subject, and suggests a composition date of 1652. My reading of the poem concurs largely with Smith's claim that sexual desire in this poem is forecast rather than expressed directly. See *Poems of Andrew Marvell*, 112.

28 See, for example, Brathwait, *English Gentlewoman*; Swetnam, *Arraignment*; and Gould, *Love Given Over*.

typical of this strain.[29] Important differences, however, between Marvell's and Carew's poems go well beyond what Smith identifies as some 'delicate distinctions' made in Marvell's poem. One crucial distinction worth noting in 'Young Love' is the care the speaker takes to differentiate love from lust. He observes that the female youth's 'fair blossoms are too green / Yet for lust, but not for Love' (11–12). By comparison, the speaker in Carew's 'Second Rapture', although admitting he is past his prime, seeks not love but lust, and his own sexual gratification as an end in itself: 'Give me a wench about thirteen, / Already voted to the queen / Of lust and lovers' (7–9). Carew's choice of the term 'wench' rather than 'maid' to refer to a sexually experienced youth is compatible with early modern usage.[30] However, reading this poem from a modern perspective on adolescent prostitution, it is difficult to tell where the centre of pathos ought to fall: on the adolescent target of his lust or on the speaker himself, whose 'old decayed appetite' (24) rejects any of the usual satisfactions in a life well lived. Happiness is now found not in 'fortune, honour, nor long life, / Children, or friends, nor a good wife' (3–4), but instead within a temporary, self-absorbed form of sexual gratification at the expense of another, much younger being. For him, a single moment of 'true bliss' is, we are told in the last line, the only form of happiness available to him. Satirizing the sexual appetites of older men who lust after adolescents, Carew mockingly situates this second rapture as a manifestation of an elderly would-be lover's second childhood.

Unlike the elderly has-been in Carew's 'Second Rapture', the speaker in Marvell's 'Young Love' equivocates about the age and gender of the youthful object of his desires. At first glance, the apostrophe inviting a 'little infant' in the first line of Marvell's poem to 'love me now' places the speaker on the brink of a breathtakingly inappropriate indiscretion, until we consider the scope of the meaning of the word 'infant' in the seventeenth century. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, citing Edward Coke, defines the term 'infant' during this period as a legal category incorporating a range of ages up to the age of majority, which was 21 for males. However, definitions of majority in the early modern period are determined by gender, and, indeed, more applicable to boys becoming men. For the female youth addressed in 'Young Love', then, the question at issue is less one of the age of majority than of consent.

29 Marvell, *Poems of Andrew Marvell*, 72; Carew, *Collected Poems*, 127.

30 Jennifer Higginbotham argues that the term 'maid', unlike 'wench', excludes sexually experienced females. See 'Fair Maids', 175.

Internal evidence suggests the poem's addressee is a post-pubescent, adolescent female. Although her 'fair blossoms' are still 'green' (11), a commonplace association of the term 'blossom' with post-pubescent female physiology allows the possibility that she is in her mid-teens, a reading confirmed when she is compared to '[c]ommon beauties [who] stay fifteen' (9). If so, to put this poem in historical perspective, the addressee is the same age as *The Tempest*'s Miranda, and two years older than Romeo's Juliet.[31] Interestingly, we are never told the age of the (presumably) male speaker of 'Young Love'. He hints at a considerable age difference by comparing 'our sportings' to 'the nurse's with the child' (7–8) and in the hyperbolic personification of 'old Time beguiled' by 'young Love' (6). Despite this unspecified difference in age, in the process of expressing his desire, the older speaker, I argue, seeks consent and a level of mutuality that sets him apart from the ageing lover in Carew's 'Second Rapture'.

Time, both literal and personified, appears to stand still, or at least, moves too slowly for the older lover in 'Young Love', prompting him to shift into *carpe diem* mode in the second half of the poem in a direct echo of Robert Herrick's 'To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time' (1648). Herrick's poem opens with some pointed advice to female youths:

> GAther ye Rose-buds while ye may,
> Old Time is still a flying:
> And this same flower that smiles to day,
> To morrow will be dying. (1-4)

Marvell's speaker invokes such conventional anxieties about the fleeting nature of youth in 'Young Love' in his concern that 'Time may take / Thee before thy time away' (17–18), a risk to which the speaker alludes in 'Little T.C.' as well. An unstated but nevertheless important question involved in any such imagining of December/May amatory exchanges where the object of desire is likely an adolescent is an important one: can one desire amorous intimacy without desiring sexual intimacy, and if so, to what extent, as Purkiss puts it, should we indeed worry (181)? Certainly, references to sporting between lovers in other love elegies by Marvell and his peers allude readily to physical intimacy.

It is worth noting, too, that the fourth stanza of 'Young Love' figuratively violates the 'delicate distinctions' that are, as Smith suggests (72), in play throughout the rest of the poem, especially in the violent imagery of the

31 Williams, 'Introduction', 4.

'lusty bull or ram' seeking a 'prize' for 'his morning sacrifice' ('Young Love', 15–16). The stanza chronologically separates the 'snowy lamb' and 'wanton kid' (13–14), associated here with 'Love' in the first half of the stanza (13), from the bull and ram that symbolize lust (15–16) in the second half. These two pairs of images, imperfectly balanced, uphold the distinction between love and lust, yet remind us of the threat posed to the youth, and to the youthful love she symbolizes, by the older, aggressive figure. Rather than celebrating predation, then, this poem cautions against it. Moreover, the speaker makes explicit the requirement for consent, urging in the fifth stanza 'Of this need we'll virtue make, / And learn love before we may' (19–20). The desired gratification here is not uniformly egocentric as in Carew's 'Second Rapture'. Speaking in the first person plural, the Marvellian lover seeks mutual edification, with this element of reciprocity restated in the poem's closing vision of a double coronation. In the last stanza of 'Young Love' the speaker states 'I crown thee with my love' and asks her to 'Crown me with thy love again', ultimately promising that 'we both shall monarchs prove' (30–32). The implied reciprocity inherent in this image, and the suggestion that *both* lovers will be learning about love, implies she may not be the only virgin here.

These poems thereby acknowledge youth to be a separate, culturally significant period for girls on the way to womanhood, and recognize female youth as a force to be reckoned with. Situating conceptualizations of seventeenth-century female youth within a proto-Romantic conception of childhood locates the agency lurking within the poetic conceit of beguiled Time. When the *carpe diem* motif is invoked in Marvell's 'Little T.C.' and 'Young Love', as with other poems invoking this motif, Time becomes a pivotal force, but its forward momentum is counteracted by the beloved's evident resistance (although in Marvell's two poems discussed here, we do not hear the nymph's reply). That is to say, the sense of urgency in the would-be lover's plea to wait no longer is a product of the speaker's recognition of the apparent stasis inherent within female adolescence: visually, she is no longer a child, but conceptually, she is not quite an adult. It is this notion of Time beguiled, as if temporarily arrested, that positions female adolescence as a period defined by prospective rather than consummated love. The object of desire, in Marvell's poetry, remains youthful, and, I would argue, closer to childhood than womanhood because her amatory potential is always unfulfilled, unrealized, and impeded by the ongoing activity of becoming. Her capacity to become an object of both erotic as well as amatory desire is suspended within the liminal space of an inscrutable adolescence that may be on the cusp of or just past pubescence.

This idea of female youth is one that beguiles old Time, but also bides her time until she is ready to assume the form her culture deems to be full womanhood. The masculine speaker in Marvell's poetry is in this sense doubly analogous to old Time, both beguiled and forestalled by a young love he cannot take further without her consent. Situating poems by Donne, Marvell, and Carew within the context of proto-Romantic conceptions of childhood provides a context through which we can better understand what has been viewed as the ambivalent eroticism of poems that dramatize the movement into full puberty during a distinctive life stage for females after childhood, but prior to reaching full womanhood.

This analysis has shown that at least two distinctive ideas of childhood – the Puritan and the proto-Romantic – were culturally intelligible ideologies circulating during the seventeenth century. Not only are both conceptions of childhood more complex than is often assumed, but also both ideational categories have much lengthier historical trajectories than are currently recognized. Having invoked this comparison between the Puritan and proto-Romantic, I now want to propose that at the intersection between these two culturally significant ideas of childhood might exist an early version of the weaker, more vulnerable myth of innocence discussed above. This weaker form of innocence, I propose, is apparent in the depiction of the historically resonant virginal couple situated at the centre of seventeenth-century poetic figurations of innocence.

It is generally assumed that in *Paradise Lost*, Adam and Eve are created as fully fledged adults. It is worth asking, however, whether they are instead portrayed by Milton as youths rather than adults, even though the latter reading is suggested in the poem's description of Adam's 'manly grace' (4.490.) In their prelapsarian state, Adam and Eve are of course morally innocent. But their lack of knowledge is emphasized: they continuously explore and rehearse what they know about each other, and discuss – to the point of dispute – their proper roles and duties in the garden. Adam even milks Raphael for as much knowledge as the angel is willing to provide, in a conversation that ironically sets limits on human learning. In this respect, Milton's Adam and Eve, at the moment of creation, are figured more as youths rather than adults in that their precarious vulnerability aligns them with a weaker, less powerful form of childhood innocence.

Differences emerge between Adam and Eve around the question of knowledge, with significant consequences. A distinction well recognized in scholarship on *Paradise Lost* observes that, in tasting the fruit, Eve is motivated by a thirst for knowledge, whereas Adam, with what Stanley Fish calls 'troubled clarity', discerns the nature of her sin and its consequences,

and decides to fall with her.[32] Unlike the figurative child inhabiting the proto-Romantic aesthetic discussed above, and unlike Adam, Eve lacks direct access to divine knowledge, which leaves her vulnerable to the false promises of higher knowledge proposed by Satan in the form of the serpent. Although both intelligent and curious, she remains too pliant and naïve to resist the serpent's persuasive rhetoric. In this respect, Milton's Eve is more closely aligned with the weak version of precarious innocence than with the proto-Romantic aesthetic of childhood.

This proto-Romantic idea thus offers an informative lens through which to understand the fascination with childhood and female youth evident in seventeenth-century lyric and epic poetry. Lyric poems by Vaughan and Traherne anticipate a Romantic aesthetic in their recasting of the child's moral nature through Neoplatonic terms that subvert Calvinist notions of infant depravity. Marvell's metaphysical conceits adapt this version of potent innocence to explore the power inherent in female youth, and thus acknowledge it as a distinct, temporal phase of life between girlhood and womanhood. Furthermore, examining these constructions of childhood and youth in lyric poetry of the period illuminates the cultural logic that shapes Eve's precarious relationship to knowledge in Milton's epic, thereby exposing the insufficiency of Edenic innocence as a model for female youth. It is evident, therefore, that cultural constructions of childhood innocence, whether in the modern or early modern period, are more multi-dimensional and complex than historians of childhood have thus far recognized. In Victorian culture, following upon the emergence of the Romantic idea of childhood during the nineteenth century, a so-called 'cult of the child' coalesced around the figure of the female child on the cusp of puberty. In such cultural forms, as in seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry, navigating the fine line between representation and transgression relies to an extent on the viewers' and readers' assumptions of childhood innocence as the framework through which such depictions are interpreted.[33] That an elevated view of the moral nature of childhood and female youth can be framed in seventeenth-century literature as either powerful or powerless

32 Fish, *Surprised by Sin*, 1. For an interesting discussion of the way Eve's access to knowledge is mediated, see Liebert, 'Rendering "More Equal"', 162. See also Wittreich, *Feminist Milton*. Although there are important differences between the portrayals of Adam and Eve in Genesis compared to *Paradise Lost*, Irenaeus of Lyons, an early Christian writer, proposed that Adam and Eve of the Old Testament were both innocent and infantile in their lack of understanding of 'those things that are wickedly born in the soul through lust and shameful desires'. Quoted in Davis, 'Brilliance of a Fire', 387.

33 See Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence*, for discussion of this question within a Victorian context.

contributes to the critical project of denaturalizing mythologies of childhood and youth in all periods, and augments our historical perspective on the cultural politics of innocence.

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About the author

Margaret Reeves teaches seventeenth-century English literature and children's literature in the Department of Critical Studies and is an Associate Member of the Gender and Women's Studies programme at the University of British Columbia's Okanagan campus. She co-edited *Shell Games: Studies in Scams, Frauds, and Deceits* (*1300–1650*) with Mark Crane and Richard Raiswell; co-authored a history of the Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies with Louise Frappier; and has published essays on the literary historiography of the novel and on women's writing, including works by Elizabeth Cary, Margaret Cavendish, and Aphra Behn. Her current research examines children's literary cultures in the early modern period.