The Making of the Modern Child
—Morag Styles

O'Malley, Andrew. *The Making of the Modern Child: Children's Literature and Childhood in the Late Eighteenth Century*. New York and London: Routledge, 2003. 189 pp. $93 USD hc. ISBN 0-415-94299-3.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, Dr. Johnson described England as a nation of readers. This is the context in which Andrew O'Malley's monograph makes a timely contribution to the increasingly popular intersecting fields of the history of reading, children's literature, and cultural studies. In particular, he sets his discussion in the late eighteenth century and considers representations of childhood which, he reminds us, is, as a category, neither universal nor natural, but culturally and historically specific and constructed. In this accessible and well-informed volume, O'Malley takes the reader on a journey through the history of childhood in this period by focusing on different elements of cultural life, such as children's books and chapbooks, pedagogy in schools and in publications for children, and, as the title of Chapter 3 suggests, "the medical management of the child." Here the author draws on Foucault, showing how the new medical knowledge and related "lay" books of advice to parents, pediatric theory, and increasing interest in how children's minds worked and bodies developed helped to foster a sharper distinction between childhood and adulthood. O'Malley has done his homework diligently, consulting a wide range of primary sources, and the book is sprinkled with illustrations which help to bring late Enlightenment texts for children alive for twenty-first century readers.

O'Malley sets the book in a socio-cultural context and one of his main contentions is that children's literature became in this period one of "the crucial mechanisms for disseminating and consolidating middle class ideology" (11). He emphasizes what he sees as the ideological cohesion of the middle class in

this period as it attempted to disassociate itself more clearly from upper-class indulgence and dissipation, on the one hand, and from the so-called ignorance of plebeian culture, on the other. The middle-class belief in rationality and moderation, he argues, foregrounded education, making the schooling and upbringing of children a natural focus of attention in the eighteenth century. While the argument is broadly persuasive, I wonder whether middle-class ideological cohesion was quite so clear-cut as O'Malley suggests. One only has to think of the differences between, to take one group among many, nonconformist and Anglican Evangelical women writers for children with their differing views of childhood in that period, to have some reservations about O'Malley's claim. There are also some notable absences in terms of a systematic theorization of class and reference to key scholars in the field is patchy.

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One of the most interesting aspects of O'Malley's discussion is that he does not concern himself with the usual debates about the so-called moralistic conservatism of didactic children's books often linked to a species of realism, or the relative freedom in more liberal texts favouring fantasy that were produced later in the period. As he puts it, such polarization tends to "draw attention away from the material conditions under which children's books were . . . produced, and from the class dynamics at work" in their dissemination (20). As few critics have tackled the history of children's books and the changing construction of childhood in this period with this particular emphasis, O'Malley's work will contribute usefully to debates within the field.

O'Malley pays close attention to the texts themselves and considers their gendered nature (there is no time to discuss the latter in a short review). He shows how the severe Puritanism which profoundly influenced the nature of children's books in the seventeenth century was increasingly replaced by a different sort of didacticism. The goal of most children's authors of the later period was to teach young readers to be responsible for their own individual actions, so "their" literature featured "examples of young people who, having internalised accepted modes of behaviour, no longer required the direct intervention of their parents and guardians to correct their own deficiencies" (96). These fictions were often presented as "real life" stories as in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Original Stories from Real Life*

(1791).

O'Malley also gives serious attention to the chapbooks of this period, including what he calls "transitional" books which resembled chapbooks in that they were small in size, attractive to handle, printed on cheap paper, and evolved more out of an oral tradition than individual authorship. As he puts it, these chapbook hybrids "managed successfully to convey the essential middle class virtues of hard work, self-denial, industry and education because their chapbook elements were often subordinated to, or overshadowed by, a middle class ideology" (27). He points out that these books did not signal the disappearance of the less moralistic and sometimes subversive chapbooks which survived well into the nineteenth century. In fact, O'Malley acknowledges that "rational, moral, and more or less strictly didactic children's books coexisted with works combining plebeian constructions and middle-class objectives, and with traditional chapbooks and fairy tales. . ." (124). O'Malley also brings together the views of some well-known commentators such as Mitzi Myers, Percy Muir, and Mary Jackson (with the surprising omission of F.J. Harvey Darton), but offers his own fresh perspective on popular literature of the eighteenth century and beyond.

In the final chapter, O'Malley turns his attention to fantasy literature for children, mostly poetry, of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. He argues that by the early nineteenth century a new middle-class form of fantasy literature emerged which would eventually develop into the "golden age" "Victorian construction of childhood as a period of wonder, playful nonsense, and uninhibited imagination" (135). O'Malley then contrasts Blake's radical depiction of childhood with its exploited chimney sweeps, reluctant schoolboys and the "innocent" orphans of Holy Thursday ("multitudes of lambs") with the "safe" whimsical fantasy of poets like William Roscoe and Wordsworth's seminal, but essentially conservative, idealization of childhood in the first decade of the nineteenth century.

Historians of reading usually attempt to provide a detailed picture of a reading society in order to offer insights into the sort of books people might have had in their possession and how they used them. For example, in his study of the Romantic period, William St. Clair asserts that these texts were "produced by their authors, within generic conventions of a specific historical time, with implied readers and intended rhetorical effects in mind" (5-6). Robert Darnton argues that the first steps towards a history of reading involve investigating "the ideals and assumptions underlying reading in the past" (16). This would include the history of education and literacy, a review of relevant literary and philosophical theories, consideration of the physical appearance of the books themselves as well as their production and distribution, and the

records individuals have left about their reading habits. In a similar spirit, James Machor argues in *Readers in History* that scholars need to explore "the dynamics of reading and the textual construction of audience as products of historically specific fields, where social conditions, ideologies, rhetorical practices, interpretive strategies, and cultural factors of race, class, and gender intersect" (xi). Although he does not cite any of these scholars' work, O'Malley does cover some of this terrain effectively, but his interest lies in the ideas and ideologies the texts were promoting and with their adult producers—the world of authors, teachers, parents, scholars, educationalists, philosophers, booksellers, publishers. However, it is noteworthy that rather less attention is given to the young consumers of this literature. What is missing from this volume are the voices of young readers responding to these texts, yet they are surely a crucial resource for a rounded view of the construction of childhood in the period. Even so, this is a significant book which every scholar interested in the connections between the Enlightenment, Romanticism, changing pedagogies, and children's literature should read.

Works Cited

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Morag Styles is a Reader in Children's Literature at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, and a Fellow of Homerton College. She is the author of *From the Garden to the Street: 300 Years of Poetry for Children* (1998), co-author (with Evelyn Arizpe) of *Children Reading Pictures: Interpreting Visual Texts* (2002) and *Reading Lessons from the Eighteenth Century: Mothers, Children & Texts* (forthcoming 2006), and co-editor (with Eve Bearne) of *Art, Narrative & Childhood* (2003). She is Poetry Editor of *Cambridge Guide to Children's Books in English* (2001) and other guides to poetry, as well as anthologies for children and teachers.