



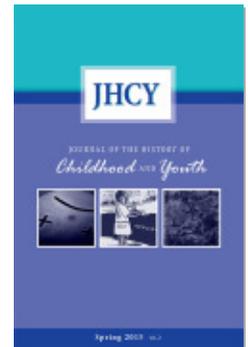
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Becoming Human: The Matter of the Medieval Child by J. Allan Mitchell (review)

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The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth, Volume 8, Number 2, Spring 2015, pp. 319-321 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: [10.1353/hcy.2015.0030](https://doi.org/10.1353/hcy.2015.0030)



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Book Reviews

Becoming Human: The Matter of the Medieval Child.

By J. Allan Mitchell.

Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014. vii-xxx + 249 pp.

Illustrations, index. Paper \$25.

*B*ecoming Human is a demanding, interdisciplinary book that does not fit into familiar categories. It proceeds as Foucauldian genealogy, a history of the present, delivered in three dense essays on medieval thought and things: (1) on embryology and infancy, (2) on miniaturization and toying, and (3) on tables and manners. These explorations offer close, impressive readings of a wide range of Middle English texts and artifacts. The interpretations are framed by sociologist Bruno Latour's actor-network theory and are designed to ratify a post-human, ecological, and materialist ethic. Such a book purposefully resists capture as a single line of argument, but its own concluding words spell its flavor well enough. *Becoming Human's* "point [was] to show how matters emerge into the world through a graduated, convoluted, and risky epigenetic process that constitutes being wherever it is instantiated. That is why the medieval evidence still matters" (175).

The first essay, "Being Born," explores how medieval writers reworked ancient embryology, the problems of Christian salvation for infants, and the mysteries of the cosmic egg. It offers especially strong readings of Giles of Rome, Nicole Oresme, St. Albertus Magnus, and the fourteenth-century poem "Pearl" and links rich secondary historical work with contemporary philosophers such as Agamben and Derrida. Historians of childhood (whatever their period of study) could benefit from an over-arching point given here: the problem of what to make of human becoming—birth and growth—is not new. When we confront human origins and change, useful polarities collapse. One might conclude that childhood itself has a troubled, if generative, relationship with dialectical thinking.

The second section, "Childish Things," offers an ontology of the small: toys, figurines, dolls, puppets, and maps. Latourian vocabulary (nonhuman actors, relational objects) comes to the fore as the essay argues for a polymorphic (as

opposed to Aristotle's hylomorphic) reading of things. Mitchell insists that the smallest plaything "already constitutes an obstacle to pure fantasy, mystification, idolatry, or ideation"; to it "humans are subject and out of which subjectivity is constituted" (60). As this larger argument proceeds, I was struck by an especially poignant short passage on Chaucer's astrolabe and a fascinating extended treatment of Sir Thopas in *The Canterbury Tales* (56–57, 104–115).

The final essay, "The Mess," provides a third adventure into places, artifacts, practices, and writings (tables for eating, communion, and discipline) where objects and subjects are intermingled promiscuously, sustaining and transforming each other. Perhaps, the most relevant part of this briefer essay for childhood is the analysis of a number of Renaissance books on manners: the *Babees Book*, Caxton's *Book of Curtesye*, and *The Boke of Nurture* (146–151). The effort here is thorough, but the central claim that these books produced disciplined universal subjects seems less than compelling to me.

Mitchell deserves praise for intellectual courage, academic rigor, and interpretative creativity. The scope of his reading alone is stunning, and the notations provide something of a lesson plan for those seeking to learn. On one level this is a book for specialists; on another it poses epistemological and ontological questions that extend beyond any boundaries. It will be read, reread, notated, and handled again and again.

For all its virtues, *Becoming Human* collapses discourses too violently for me. We have Chaucer's contemporaries purchasing trinkets as "middle-class consumers" and John Lydgate offering diet advice for a "bourgeois subject's cultivation of self-mastery" (111, 125). Giles of Rome can be seen as making the way for the nineteenth-century coinage of "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny," only if the distinction between nature and nurture is outside the domain of analysis, transcending the development of early-modern rationalism (17, 23). None of these questionable readings are incidental. The book is an avowed attempt to establish the "legitimacy" of the medieval period—to recover who we have been and will be again. "We have always been medieval" (xvii). It seems to me that *Becoming Human* suffers from what Yithak Melamed called the habit of pursuing "charitable interpretations" (*Philosophy and Its History: Aims and Methods*, edited by Mogens Laerke, Justin Smith, and Eric Schilsser [Oxford University Press, 2013]: 258–277).

Disrupting the medieval-modern distinction is part of the book's larger purpose, but the terms for doing so are obscure. One of the more quizzical mechanisms appears to be the use of the word "anthropocene"—an era where human action transforms the earth (xviii, 26–27). Unfortunately this geological concept is never specified for the analytic purposes of this study, save the implication

that it is about to end. The reader is left guessing when our fall began. Was it agriculture, literacy, monotheism, enlightenment rationalism, industrial production, big oil? Not knowing blurs the renegotiation of the modern-medieval distinction underway, and this allows “anthropocene” to function like a foil. By contrast to modernity (if it ever existed), medieval thinking and things emerge as a post-human possibility, forerunners of ecological movements and epigenetic research about to reclaim truth (19, 42–43).

Where is medieval childhood in this complex, moving architecture? It is undisturbed, held in polarity with adulthood. We are told that “a brooch will continue to be viewed by adults as a brooch, even if a child has temporarily appropriated it into a game” (89); children preserve what “adult society rejects” (90); and the child is always, already a “bio-social becoming” (30–31). Did medieval master-servant order provide adequate space of “adult society?” Is sociobiological sensibility commensurate with medieval Christianity? Such questions never enter the field of play and neither can the work of historicizing childhood. Either would redirect the argument from its primary task of finding a post-human, ecological, Latourian future in medieval texts and artifacts.

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Empire, Education and Indigenous Childhoods: Nineteenth-Century Missionary Infant Schools in Three British Colonies.

Edited by Helen May, Baljit Kaur, and Larry Prochner.

Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014. 300 pp. Illustrated. Cloth £70.

Empire, Education and Indigenous Childhoods is a transnational study that explores the experiences of young “native” children in missionary infant schools in three British colonies—New Zealand, Canada, and India. The authors argue that education was vital to colonialism. They take a Foucauldian and Saidian approach to study nineteenth-century infant school education as a means of disciplining the “Othered” children and maintaining systems of colonial social power. They contend that colonial education was key in civilizing indigenous children and transforming their “heathen,” “aboriginal” lives. The