Kimberlee Anne Campbell

Beware of Biting Child: Childhood Recaptured in the Medieval Legend of "Doon and Olive"

Prevailing wisdom has long held the child to be non-existent in medieval art and literature.[1] The child, when he appears, is a miniature adult not only outfitted in infant-sized replicas of his parents' clothing but most often possessing a sagacity and gift for rhetoric that we, from our twentieth-century vantage point, would consider far beyond a child's ken. In the Old French epic legends, as in other literary and artistic modes of representation, Charlemagne, Doon de Mayence, and Guillaume d'Orange, in the narratives devoted to their *enfances* or childhood, are depicted as extraordinarily competent children; precocious paragons performing great deeds at what, to us, must seem an astonishingly young age.

This representation of the child as a miniature adult is admittedly ubiquitous in medieval art and literature, but the question remains: is it exclusive, as has long been thought by critics and historians?

In fact, with respect to the Middle Ages, the very concept of "childhood" is elusive. A theoretical stance on the subject is reiterated in the early part of the twelfth century by Honorius Augustodunensis in his *Elucidarium*.[2] Among other things, this treatise discusses medieval philosophical theories as to age categories with respect to the life of a human being. Honorius divides a human life into six ages or stages: childhood, youth,

[1] Jacques Le Goff, *La Civilisation de l'Occident médiéval* (1964; Paris: Arthaud, 1984) 325: "on l'a dit, il n'y a pas d'enfants au Moyen Age, il n'y a que de petits adultes."

[2] Le Goff 192. See also Yves LeFèvre, *L'Elucidarium et les Lucidaires*, Bibliothèque des écoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome, fasc. 180 (Paris: Boccard, 1954).

adolescence, maturity, old age, and "decrepitude," or what we might call "senility." Each stage corresponds to a certain number of years. "Childhood," in this medieval theory, runs from ages one to seven; "youth" from seven to fourteen. "Adolescence" includes ages fourteen to twenty-one; "maturity," ages twenty-one to fifty; "old age," fifty to seventy; and "decrepitude," seventy to one hundred, or death.

Honorius's treatise discusses the theoretical stages of human life. The reality, however, was quite different. Anthropological studies suggest that, in the Middle Ages, human life was considerably shorter than the aforementioned theory would imply. Robert Delort notes that almost half of all children died before reaching the age of fourteen.[3] A man was considered old at thirty-five. Charlemagne, who lived to be just over seventy, was regarded as something of a marvel. Furthermore, the life span varied somewhat with social class. The average life expectancy was twenty-one years among the aristocracy; the warrior class often had life cut short in battle. Among the peasants, the figure is somewhat higher: twenty-eight years. In consequence, Delort comments that "the West was populated by young people; between 45 and 55 percent of the population were under 20 years of age. They began their working life when still extremely young—between 5 and 7—and shouldered responsibilities at 13 or 15."[4] In fact, under Germanic law, a man came of age at fifteen, and he would most probably not live to see his grandchildren. Grandparents were a rare entity for the medieval child.

The brevity of the average life span and consequent reduction of the age of maturity still do not explain why the child, aged one to fifteen years, would be portrayed as a miniature adult. Perhaps the most probable explanation is a literary one: One of the oldest *topoi* in literary history is that of the *puer senex* or wise

[3] Robert Delort, *Life in the Middle Ages,* trans. Robert Allen (New York: Universe Books, 1973) 59.

[4] Delort 59.

child:[5] a child who looks, behaves, and has the wisdom of an old man. This *topos* is utilized by both sacred and secular authors, figuring in the Bible as well as in the works of Ovid and Valerius Maximus. From the second century on, hagiographie writing makes continuous use of this *topos.* The *puer senex* possesses a unique combination of qualities. The child dominates space and time with his vigor and youth. He has years before him to plan and the physical capacity necessary to the realization of his projects. The old man possesses time in another way, in the form of wisdom: the knowledge won through experience and education. The combination creates an ideal prototype utilized not only by writers but by painters, miniaturists, and sculptors. Thus, the *puer senex* represents the best of all possible worlds.

Given the obvious appeal of this model, it is easy to understand the prevalence of the *topos.* However, returning to our initial question: Granted the literary and artistic dominance of the *puer senex*, we still must ask if it was the only pattern of conceptualizing and representing the child during the Middle Ages, as has often been stated.

Within the context of the Old French *chanson de geste*, the *topos* of the *puer senex* is firmly and indisputably entrenched, as I have noted above. This does not, however, mean that deviations from the mould are nonexistent. Descriptions of what we might call a "naturalized" child, divorced from the wise old man, are, if not numerous, at least not rare: I mention in passing, for example, in the *Chanson de Godin,*[6] the problem of finding suitable baby food for the infant Godin on board a ship; in the *Enfances Ogier,*[7]

[5] Ernst Robert Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter* (Bern: Francke, 1948) 106-9.

[6] Pierre Jonin, ed., *La Chanson de Godin,* in *Pages épiques du Moyen Age français: Le cycle du Roi. 2* vols. (Paris: Société d'Edition d'Enseignement Supérieur, 1970) 2: 150 (vv. 8608-17).

[7] J. Subak, ed., "Die franko-italienische Version der *Enfances Ogier* nach dem Codex Marcianus XIII," *ZRP* 33 (1909): vv 749-73.

Karloto's adolescent temper tantrum when Charlemagne declares him too young to represent France in judiciary combat; and in the *Chanson de Guillaume,*[8] the shortness of young Guy's legs when he mounts a horse.

The medieval legend of "Doon and Olive," rich in terms of an extended portrayal of "naturalized" childhood, is not therefore an isolated example of this alternative representational model. There are, in all, five extant versions of this legend: the early thirteenth-century Old French epic *Doon de La Roche,* "Olif and Landres" in the fourteenth-century Norse *Karlamagnús Saga,* the fourteenth-century Icelandic *Landresrímur,* the late fifteenth-century Spanish *novela de caballería* titled the *Historia de Enrrique, fi de Oliva,* and finally a nineteenth-century Faeroese version, the *Oluvu Kvaedi.*[9]

The story concerns a knight who marries a relative of Pepin of France. The marriage is in the beginning a happy one. The union is soon blessed with a son. Unfortunately, a traitor has been plotting against the wife. He places a man of low social status in her bed, and then accuses her of adultery before her husband and Pepin. Her protestations of innocence are not believed. She is repudiated by both her husband and Pepin. The knight remarries; his choice, ironically, is the daughter of the traitor. The knight's son by his first wife eventually flees his father's court, but returns in later years to vindicate his mother.

[8] Duncan McMillan, ed., *La Chanson de Guillaume,* SATF, 2 vols. (Paris: Picard, 1949-50) 1: vv. 1553-55.

[9] Paul Meyer and Gédéon Huet, eds., *Doon de La Roche,* SATF (Paris: Champion, 1921); Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, ed., "Af frú Olíf og Landrés syni hennar," *Karlamagnús Saga og Kappa Hans,* 3 vols. (Reykjavik: Islendingasaghaúgáfan, 1950). See also: Constance B. Hieatt, trans., *Karlamagnús Saga. The Saga of Charlemagne and his Heroes,* 3 vols. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1975-80); Finnur Jonsson, ed., "Landresrímur," *Rimnasafn 2* (1905-22): 382-472; Pascual Gayangos, ed., *Enrrique, fi de Oliva,* SBE 83 (Madrid: Rivadeneyra, 1871); V.U. Hammershaimb, éd., "Oluvu Kvaedi," Antiquarisk Tidskrift 1 (1846-8): 279-304.

Two children appear in this narrative. Each is a son of the knight-protagonist by one of his wives. The "good" son, Landri, is the child of the first wife; the "bad" son, Malingres, the child of the knight's second marriage with the traitor's daughter. From the beginning, then, a distinction is made between what is considered "good" and "bad" behavior on the part of a child. The distinction is psychologically simplistic, in that all acceptable behavior patterns are assigned to Landri; all deviant patterns to his half-brother. It is nevertheless immediately obvious that the author(s) recognized the status of the child as an independent being, with the potential for action, socially acceptable or not, outside the realms prescribed by parents—and by literary tradition. The author, in short, is interested in the study of the behavior patterns of children as separate entities from the adults with whom they share the stage.

Of the five extant versions of the legend, it is the Old French epic *Doon de La Roche* which evidences the most acute awareness of the "naturalized" child, perhaps because the narrative is developed at more length in that text. In the Old French epic, we are aware of both children from the moment of their conception. Cameo descriptions of childhood and adolescence, especially of the "good" son Landri, suggest a highly developed sensitivity to a child's universe, as well as to parent-child interaction.

The descriptions are most striking in their negativity. Childhood and to a lesser extent, adolescence, are conceived of as a period of powerlessness. The child is physically incapable of imposing the realization of his desires on the larger, stronger adults who control his universe. As Micheline de Combarieu expresses it: "Les plus jeunes d'entre eux voient, en règle générale, leurs tentatives limitées par les réactions des adultes."[10] The aristocratie society of the Middle Ages—the society depicted in the Old French epic—was a society based on the concept of force. Control belonged to the stronger man, and "weaker members [of society] were ruthlessly eliminated."[11] Hence the recognition, throughout

[10] Micheline de Combarieu, "Enfance et démesure dans l'épopée médiévale française," *L'enfant au Moyen Age.* Senefiance 9. (Aix-en-Provence: CUERMA, 1980) 423.

[11] Delort 61.

Landri's childhood years, of his inability to act or even to defend himself.

Indeed, the naturalized child, as portrayed in *Doon de La Roche*, is completely defenseless. Nor does his helplessness automatically confer upon him the status of a non-combatant with respect to the ongoing feudal/familial struggle. Early on, Landri becomes the victim of child abuse. His father, Doon, angry with his supposedly unfaithful wife, uses his son as an outlet for his rage and kicks over his son's cradle:

> Il issi de la chambre corrociez et dolenz
> Et trova la norrice sus ou palais seant,
> Et Landrïet son fil dedens le berz plorant.
> Quant li enfes le voit, si li rit bonement,
> Et li dus le bota de son pié laidement,
> Que li berz reversa et l'enfes chiet adens:
> Li viaires li fiert desus le pavement; *(Doon,* vv. 279-85)

As a baby, Landri is unable to fight back or even articulate his distress; he can only cry: "Li enfes brait et crie, qui ne set autrement:/Ne puet sa dolor dire, car il n'a pas le sens." *(Doon, vv.* 287-8). Landri's history as a battered child continues after his father's remarriage. As is often the case, there are difficulties between the child and his stepmother. The stepmother, resenting the presence of the child of a former marriage, beats Landri regularly: "Landris vait a la coït au matin et au vespre,/ Et la male marastre le bat, qu'ele ne cesse:" (*Doon,* w. 943-4). Tomiles, the traitor, encourages the marginalisation of Landri with respect to the family group: "Tomiles le fait batre garçons et pautoniers:/Si le traient le poil quant il siet au mangier," *(Doon,* vv. 925-6). Landri is incapable of resisting this aggression; the medieval text recognizes that the very survival of a baby or small child depends on the benevolence—or at least the absence of hostility—of adults. In fact, Landri's mother eventually sends her son away, as she fears for his life.

This lack of strength, or the physical force necessary to impose one's will, is linked to a lack of size. Landri, at the time of his father's remarriage, is too small to see over the heads of the crowd; furthermore, he lacks sufficient bulk to push people out of his way, so he is again thrown upon the mercy of the adults around

him. He asks his mother to carry him to the front of the crowd: "Je sui petiz et enfes, si n'i porroie aler,/Et la presse est molt grant; car m'i faites porter," *(Doon,* vv. 669-70). At this point, Landri makes an impressive speech, recalling the tradition of the *puer senex,* to the crowd, reproaching his father and his father's vassals for their conduct. But, even though the content of the speech reflects the literary tradition of the wise child, the context does not. Landri makes his speech from his mother's arms, physically elevated to the level of the adult crowd and symbolically protected by the adult presence of his mother.

If the question of sheer physical strength would seem to be the most important distinction between adults and children, it is not the only one. The author of *Doon de La Roche* notes a psychological difference as well, concerning the way in which adults and children come to terms with new and sometimes unpleasant realities. Olive, Landri's mother, is understandably depressed by the wedding of her former husband to another woman. Her son, Landri, is saddened too, but with an essential difference, for while her depression is assumed to be profound and lasting, his is portrayed as fleeting. He soon begins to laugh again as "corroz a enfant ne dure gueres mie;" *(Doon* v. 835) The author clearly distinguishes between the depth and duration of psychic trauma as felt by an adult and by a child, and, although modern child psychologists might disagree with the medieval author's analysis, it is difficult to ignore the fact that, in *Doon de La Roche,* children's reactions and behavior are dissociated and distinguished from those of adults.

I have noted above that all acceptable behavior patterns are assigned to Landri, all inappropriate activities to his younger half-brother, the son of the knight's second wife. While Landri's patient, almost "saintly" acceptance of his father's and step-family's abuse once again recalls the tradition *of puer senex,* his half-brother, Malingres, is the epitome of the mischievous child. The Norse *Karlamagnús Saga* is in this case quite descriptive. The infant Malingres, as yet unable to walk, is nevertheless aggressive in an almost animalistic way: by the age of one "he had become extremely

wily. He crept back and forth along the walls and bit men in the feet and legs."[12]

The fierce rivalry between the two half-brothers is certainly a recognizable and realistic representation of patterns of sibling interaction. In the simplest possible terms, the two children fight all the time. Malingres, the younger child, is the aggressor. For example, Malingres attempts to burn Landri: "Par les cheveux l'aert a ambe .ij. ses poinz;/Ja l'eüst ou feu ars, quant Landris se rescost," *(Doon,* vv. 984-5). In the French text, Landri's reaction to his brother's aggression is pure *puer senex:* "Mais ne le vot tochier, tant fu simples et douz." *(Doon,* v. 986). But in the *Karlamagnús Saga,* he gives as good as he gets. When he, Landri, wins a ballgame, his half-brother is so upset that he begins a fistfight. But the Norse Landri, far from remaining passive like his French counterpart, "lifts up his right hand and strikes Malalandres so hard that his cheek-bones are broken: so hard was the blow that the greater part of his teeth fell down on the ground."[13]

So, far from always being the *puer senex,* Landri too has it in him to fight back. It is not so much an unwillingness to be the aggressor—after all, in *Doon de La Roche,* he attacks the adult Tomiles with nothing more than a stick when pushed too far *(Doon, vv.* 791-801)—as the realization, always and again, that as a child he lacks the strength to emerge victorious from a physical combat. Hence the recurring formula, "If I live to bear arms." The only hope for Landri, and for his half-brother Malingres, who is equally frustrated in his attempts to realize his desires, is time. Their only possible threat is temporal: the invocation of future power when they have become adults.

[12] *Karlamagnús Saga* 131: "Og er hann var missaris gamall, gerdist hann undarlega kyndugur. Hann skreid aftur og fram med stokkum og beit í fætur mönnum qg leggi." The translation into English is Constance Hieatt's.

[13] *Karlamagnús Saga* 136: "Og nú hefur Londrés upp sína hægri hönd og slær Malalandrés svo hart, ad allt hans kinnarbein klofnar í sundur, og svo sterkur var sá pústur, ad mestur thori tannanna, er í hans höfdi voru, féllu nidur á jördina." Again, the English translation is Hieatt's.

As the two children grow older, they are gradually initiated to adult experiences. But the distinction between the status of the adult and that of the child remains nonetheless clear. As "apprentice" adults, they are not yet fully integrated into the community; they are not yet responsible for their actions. This is Tomiles' excuse for Malingres when the latter steals some horses from a pair of visiting dignitaries. An adult would have been severely punished, but, as Tomiles notes:

> "A la moie foie, sire, a grant tort m'asaillez:
> Se mes niez est or enfes, encor n'est adobez;
> Et se il fait folie, sel doit bien amender..." *(Doon,* vv. 1857-9)

In the end, Malingres is in no way chastised for the theft; the horses are merely returned to their rightful owners, and the whole incident is then forgotten.

For male children, the ritual of dubbing confirms the acquisition of adult status. The ceremony does not "create" an adult, but rather serves to reaffirm an adult status already demonstrated through the behavior of the new member of the adult community. Thus, Micheline de Combarieu notes that "ce n'est pas l'entrée en chevalerie qui fait sortir de l'enfance, c'est l'accession d'un héros à des qualités physiques et éthiques d'adulte qui est sanctionée par l'entrée en chevalerie."[14] In *Doon de La Roche,* this change of status is reflected in the new placement of Landri's sword. When Landri first takes up arms against his stepmother's family, he is not yet a knight, so he wears his sword differently: not girded on, as a knight would, but suspended from his neck. In Constantinople, however, when Landri is dubbed, the Byzantine Emperor "li ceint l'espée, voiant ses barons toz," *(Doon,* v. 1431). The symbolic placement of the sword confirms the reality of Landri's new adult status.

Landri, as a knight, is now an adult, with adult responsibilities, and yet there are still some facets of his new status with which he is unfamiliar. The Emperor's daughter, Salmadrine, is quite taken with Landri; so taken, in fact, that she makes an

[14] de Combarieu 410.

appearance one night in his bedroom. She slips into bed with Landri, who awakes to find her breasts resting on his chest. Like many adolescents at the moment of their first sexual encounter, Landri is hardly sanguine. The author *of Doon de La Roche* notes: "Que li tremble li cors com foille qui balie;/[Ainz] mais de fame en terre n'ot itel compaignie." *(Doon, vv.* 2717-8). Landri eventually persuades Salmadrine to depart, although—curious—she demands that he teach her one "French game" first; several kisses are exchanged.

This passage is particularly interesting in that it offers one of only a very few medieval insights into female children and adolescents. If the portrayal of naturalized male children is limited in French literature, the portrayal of naturalized female children is almost non-existent. And yet, the author of *Doon de La Roche* provides a glimpse of a girl-child approaching womanhood, curious about sex, and deathly serious about that first boyfriend: Salmadrine threatens either to kill or to prostitute herself if she cannot have Landri. Her exaggerated reaction to the possibility that she may not obtain the man she desires is the female equivalent of the male adolescent tendency towards *démesure* noted by Micheline de Combarieu. Indeed, Salmadrine's responses bear out de Combarieu's comments concerning the inability of adolescents to distinguish appropriate from inappropriate methods of realizing their goals.[15]

A biting baby, a battered child, a lovesick teenage girl: in conclusion, while we acknowledge the power and pervasiveness of the image of the *puer senex,* the wise child, in medieval literature, it is clear that the mode is not exclusive. Medieval authors were perfectly capable of observation, of seeing and depicting the child in other than symbolic terms. The portrait of the child as it emerges in versions of the legend of "Doon and Olive" is obviously not restricted by the traditional *topos.* Rather, as Jeanne Lods has remarked with respect to other epic legends:[16] "Certains traits se retrouvent à plusieurs reprises et ce sont des traits d'observation,

[15] de Combarieu 430.

[16] Jeanne Lods, "Le thème de l'enfance dans l'épopée française," *Insula* 25 (1970): 59.

non de convention." No real children in the Middle Ages? Of course there are. In the shadow of prevailing literary tradition, one has only to search for them more carefully.

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NEH Summer Seminar for College Teachers

The Newberry Library in Chicago will sponsor an N.E.H. Summer Seminar for College Teachers entitled "The Poetics of Sign and Discourse in Medieval Literature," to be given from June 19-August 11, 1989 by Eugene Vance, Professor of French and Comparative Literature at Emory University. This interdisciplinary seminar will deal with medieval and modern theories of sign and discourse as ways of approaching the poetics of selected medieval texts. Works and authors will include the *Chanson de Roland,* Chrétien's *Yvain,* and selections from the writings of Dante and Chaucer. All participants will receive stipends to cover the costs of travel, housing, and books. The application deadline is 1 March 1989. Please address all inquiries to:

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Personalia

Germán Orduna, who holds the chair of Spanish medieval literature at the Universidad de Buenos Aires and directs the journal *Incipit,* writes that he is preparing a critical edition of the *Chrónica del rey Don Pedro y su hermano el rey Don Enrique, hijos del rey Don Alfonso XI.* Several recent articles appearing in Argentinian publications are of interest to readers of *Olifant:* "El texto del *Poema de Mio Cid* ante el proceso de la tradicionalidad oral y escrita," *Letras* 14 (Univ. Católica, Buenos Aires, 1985): 57-66; "El *Rimado de Palacio,* testamento politico-moral y religioso del Canciller Ayala," *Estudios en Homenaje a Don Claudio Sánchez Albornoz en sus 90 años* (Buenos Aires, 1986) 4: 215-37; and "La 'estoria' de Acteón: Ovidio y la *General Estoria* alfonsí," *Letras* 12 (Univ. Catolica, Buenos Aires, 1984-85): 134-39.

David P. Schenck's study, *The Myth of Guillaume,* is being published this spring by Summa Publications. Prof. Schenck has recently been named the full-time Acting Provost of the Office of Academic Affairs at the University of South Florida.

Mary Jane Schenck, Chair of the Division of Humanities at the University of Tampa, has seen two books appear in the past year: *The Fabliaux: Tales of Wit and Deception,* a Purdue University Monograph in the Romance Languages (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1987), and *Read, Write, Revise* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988).

A member of *Olifant's* Editorial Board, **Hans-Erich Keller** (Ohio State) has assembled eighteen previously published articles to appear in a collection entitled *Esquisses épiques,* due in 1989 from Slatkine, Geneva. His study, "Propos sur la structure de *Ronsasvals,"* appeared in *Studia in honorem prof. M. de Riquer* (Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 1987) 2: 567-80. Another article, "Pour une réhabilitation des Miracles de Notre Dame par personnages: à propos du miracle *Une femme que Nostre Dame garda d'estre arse,"* was in *French Forum* 12 (1987): 133-44. He has recently been reelected to a second term as Vice-President of the Association Internationale d'Etudes Occitanes.