1

Introduction

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Contraband: aesthetes, pornographers and paedophiles

These days a book entitled Children and Sexuality rings alarm bells. Is it another call to whip up the flames demanding an end to sexual abuse and other forms of behaviour that contribute to the current malaise – some will say outright hysteria and panic? Or is it something else? No doubt exists that in the early twenty-first century many Westerners, and perhaps Easterners too, find themselves in the midst of a moral crisis about children: their mental and physical well-being, especially their safety and new levels of obesity; their legal rights in systems of law currently in rapid transition; the state’s sense that childrens’ rights must be protected and policed; as well as concerns about their education, access to the Internet and other forms of vulnerability. On grey days, when the media lurch out about the decay of our children, it seems as if we dwell in the land of The Color Purple.

A book attempting to compile the history of sexual abuse might repay the effort but this book does not do that.¹ We the contributors say much in these pages about scandal and abuse, past and present, yet our remit in Children and Sexuality takes us elsewhere: to the evolving concepts of childhood and, concurrently, to forms of sexual expression among both children and adults at defined historical moments when we could construct adequate contexts.² Our attention here is more specifically focused on the versions of sexuality found in the lives of these children or the adults with whom they interacted.

We take the long view: children and their sexualities (both in the plural) from the Ancient Greeks to the Great War and we do so largely apart from the theories of the great system-builders of modern child sexuality. We work collectively as cultural historians who have selected
a limited number of case histories (some will say too limited to be represen-
tative) of intergenerational sexual arrangements and attachments, each located within its historical epoch. Our coverage is also eclectic: we make no claim for its representativeness. And we strive to be especially vigilant to the cultural specificities of childhood itself and the different constructions of childhood over time – a further reason why each ‘case study’ necessarily reconfigures childhood. In some instances, as in the section on the Middle Ages, the ‘case history’ is textual rather than biographical while aiming to provide deep detail, as it were, rather than generalize sweepingly from the superficial glossing of texts. In brief, the book does not amount to a panopticon of childhood in the sexual domain but to selective moments capable of suggesting the range of issues and problems in interpretation. If *Children and Sexuality* sheds light on the modern dilemma it will be as an added fillip – presentist VAT – rather than an integral component of our call.

No one can doubt the explosiveness of the interface of children and sexuality today, one reason why it continues to be overlooked, conveniently avoided. Provided that the approach is ‘clinical’ and ‘practical’ (scientific, medical, prescriptive), there has been little impediment to the contemporary discussion of childhood sexuality (as in most of the works cited above in note 1). But as soon as the discussion turns to ethical, moral, legal and legislative aspects, the topic becomes charged, fraught, and often too delicate to conduct in polite discourse. As historians who base our arguments on sources we take some sanctuary in our documents; yet not even archival refuge will immunize us from the reality of this topic’s frayed and nervous moral edges. We acknowledge them and hope we have approached our materials openly, without dwelling on sexuality’s sometimes repugnant, sensational, or illegal facets. If, as we continue to be assured, the history of childhood in the aftermath of Philippe Ariès is currently a burgeoning field with well-developed tentacles extending in many directions, especially in the media, it cannot claim to be so in this domain. Even Ariès speculated relatively little about children in relation to sexuality, and scholars in his footsteps have also been reticent. Apart from the pathological dimensions, sexuality has eluded this field’s grip, and even an historian of sexuality as pioneering as the late Michel Foucault took extreme care when discussing intergenerational sexual relations in the Ancient world. We can do worse than tread as delicately as he did.

Childhood sexuality lies on the border of taboo and the frontier of suspicion despite decades of clinical psychiatric observation from the time of Freud and Klein. The motives of those researching these topics