

Barbara Hanawalt

Childhood and Youth in Medieval London



Born in New Jersey in 1941. She completed her Ph. D. at the University of Michigan in 1971. After a variety of teaching positions she taught at Indiana University from 1974 to 1987. She is currently a professor of medieval history at the University of Minnesota. Her books include *Crime in East Anglia in the Fourteenth Century: Norfolk Gaol Delivery Rolls, 1307-1316*, trans. Norfolk Record Society, vol. 44, 1976; *Crime and Conflict in English Communities, 1300-1348* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), and *The Ties That Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986. Paperback edition, 1988). — Address: Department of History, University of Minnesota, 614 Social Sciences Tower, Minneapolis, MN 55455, USA.

For the past dozen years my interests have focused on medieval English social history including history of the family, peasants, life cycle, and the popular and material culture along with the demographic and economic environment of the late medieval period. I had previously concentrated my studies on the peasantry of late medieval England. This resulted in a book in 1986, *The Ties That Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England*. Upon completion of this exhaustive study of peasant families I found that I still had questions unanswered about the experiences of people in various stages of life. In particular, the period of youth or adolescence was a vague, not well-defined period falling between a well-documented childhood period and that of marriage. Turning from peasantry to the urban environment, I conceived of a book investigating the life cycle of medieval Londoners.

The history of childhood and adolescence has received considerable attention from historians since the publication of Philippe Ariès's *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime* (Paris, 1960). In it he blithely dismissed the possibility that medieval people recognized childhood and youth as stages of life. My own work on peasant families and many other books and articles have corrected that perception, but his work has left a fascination about exactly how medieval people did perceive these stages of

life and how they experienced them. These are the questions that have occupied my thought and writing during the year at the Wissenschaftskolleg.

I did the research for the book I am writing in 1988 — 89 when I spent a year in London's archives with funding from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation. In doing the research in London's rich and complex archives I envisioned two books on London — one on the life cycle experiences of medieval Londoners of all social classes and one on dispute resolution. When I arrived at the Wissenschaftskolleg in the autumn of 1990 I began to write the book on the experiences of Londoners from the cradle to the grave. By the end of February, I was still writing about childhood and beginning to despair about finishing. Fortunately, a friend intervened and suggested that I limit my book to the subject of childhood and youth. Over the next decade I will, therefore, have three books on London. The current one on childhood and youth, tentatively entitled *Coming of Age in Medieval London*, is now in a nearly completed draft and will go to the publisher in 1992. I will then write a book on London's women, a subject on which I have written several important articles, and one on non-adjudicated dispute settlement among medieval Londoners.

Some of the conclusions that I have reached about the experiences of childhood, youth, and women during the course of this year's work deserve mention. I was able to learn a great deal about the children of London citizens because, when they lost a father, they along with their inheritances became wards of the mayor of London. London law directed the mayor to assign the care of the children and their goods to people who would not be in line to inherit the property should the children die. This very humane law protected the children from unscrupulous relatives in the father's line who might have killed them to inherit the property. In practice, the mother, her brother, or a guild brother of the deceased father tended to be the most obvious choice of guardian for both the orphan's person and property. London mothers not only had the benefit of raising their children and managing their property until they reached the age of majority, but also as widows they received a life interest in one third of their former husband's estate. They could even take this property into another marriage. About two thirds of the widows who appeared in the London court of orphans had already remarried, usually to one of the former husband's guild brothers. The benefits of marrying a widow included access to her third of the former husband's estate as well as use of the orphans' property. London's laws, therefore, tended to emphasize horizontal social ties and exchange of goods among fellow guildsmen at a cost to the patriline. Other kin and exchange systems, such as that of Florence, protected the patriline and created societies with vertical social networks. Apprenticeship also emphasized horizontal ties in London society since

youth tended to be fostered out to masters selected from the father's guild. I have been able to trace the increasing importance of these mechanisms for concentrating wealth and familial ties within the guild structure over the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. During the sixteenth century the process produced the famous liveried trading companies of London. My work has provided a very clear example of how laws and customs surrounding the life cycle can bring about a basic change in a broader social structure.

In addition to these more theoretical insights into the importance of studying life cycle, I have also been able to study the human dimension of the experiences of London's children and youth. Since most of my evidence comes either from court records or from books of advice on how children and youth are to behave, I have experimented with conveying this information both in a conventional scholarly format and in a narrative style. Thus each chapter contains a short description of the experience of an individual in the particular life stage. The individuals are real people drawn from court cases, but the experiences are a composite of the information in the chapter. For instance, I know that an eight-year-old school boy died on his way to school when he swung on a beam projecting from London bridge and slipped to his death in the Thames river. He is my biography for a chapter on schooling and social expectations as presented in the books of manners. I have put him in a home in which his parents are always giving him proverbial wisdom on his behavior and have high expectations for his success by sending him to school. When the accident occurs, he has just left the dinner table, where his father had rewarded him with a glass of wine for showing off his knowledge of Latin to his guests. His mother admonishes him to go directly to school and not play along the way. Feeling both cocky and rebellious, he does not heed her advice.

In addition to my work on the book manuscript, I wrote the introduction and did the final editing on a collection of essays, *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context*, that explores the intersection of late fourteenth-century English literature and historical events at the time. It will be published by University of Minnesota Press in 1991. I have also begun editing a second collection of essays on *The City and Spectacle in Medieval Europe* which will appear in 1993. It was an outgrowth of a conference held at University of Minnesota in February 1991.

Among the enriching experiences of the year were numerous trips in both the former West and East Germanies to see medieval architecture and carving. I have become an informed admirer of both wood and stone carving in Germany.