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The Golden Age

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The “Golden Age” is a Greco-Roman concept, introduced in Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, which pictures a race of men who “lived like gods without sorrow of heart, remote and free from toil and grief: miserable age rested not on them; but with legs and arms never failing they made merry with feasting beyond the reach of all evils” (2007). In children’s literature, the term was first proposed by the mid-twentieth century British biographer (and Inkling) Roger Lancelyn Green, whose use of it was ideologically freighted but historically useful. Since Green, however, the term has spread and morphed to become a designation of generic excellence: there is a “Golden Age” of children’s book illustration, a “second Golden Age” of children’s fantasy, and a “Golden Age” of African American children’s books. As Raymond Williams (1976) notes of every keyword he included, “Golden Age” seems “inextricably bound up with the problems it was being used to discuss.” In the case of “Golden Age,” does the paradigm tint—or even obscure—the picture?

The first Golden Age of children’s literature began, more or less, with *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and ended with *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926), although some would start earlier, with Catherine Sinclair’s *Holiday House* (1839), or end earlier, with *Peter Pan* (1911). In *Tellers of Tales* (1965), Green is less interested in marking

boundaries than in describing the underlying cultural shift that allowed excellent children’s books to be produced. He sees Kenneth Grahame’s *Golden Age* (1895) as a watershed text: “Suddenly children were no longer being written down to any more—they were being written up: you were enjoying spring in its own right and for itself, not looking on it anxiously as a prelude to summer.” It makes sense that Grahame and Green, as Oxford-educated Englishmen, would seize on a classical metaphor to describe the pastoral, pagan world of childhood. But it is vital to remember that this metaphor did not describe the whole world, but rather the middle- and upper-middle-class strata of the British Empire. This limitation is also a strength because it implies that the “Golden Age” was not a mythic space but an historical time period.

In his landmark study *The Romantic Ideology* (1977), Jerome McGann complains that “the scholarship and criticism of Romanticism and its works are dominated by a Romantic Ideology, by an uncritical absorption in Romanticism’s own self-representations.” Grahame’s *Golden Age* draws on Romantic assumptions about childhood, but so does Green’s “Golden Age.” From his Marxist perspective, McGann would describe both Grahame and Green as engaging in Romantic dramas of displacement and idealization, in which the vision of a timeless utopia elides textual conflicts and contradictions. *Tellers of Tales* thus emerges, not as a critical text, but as a wonderful example of the phenomenon it seeks to explain. The question then becomes: Does the term “Golden Age” always, and in every context,

re-inscribe Romantic assumptions, or can it be used to unpack the Romantic ideologies that structure classic children's books?

According to Green, "Golden Age" authors such as Lewis Carroll, George MacDonald, and Frances Hodgson Burnett realized for the first time that children were not just undeveloped adults. This allowed them to understand childhood as a life-stage with positive attributes that should be creatively celebrated, not didactically squelched. Childhood thus became "a good thing, a joyous thing—a new world to be explored, a new species to be observed and described, a precious experience to be recaptured out of the past and presented truly and lovingly for its own sake" (Green 1965). Like Charles Darwin's Galapagos turtles and birds, it was thought that children "naturally" inhabited a Neverland—a separate sphere—that was cut off from civilization. Green presents this "new world" as a place that was discovered, not invented, by mid-century Victorians. Children, he suggests, were suddenly seen *as they really are*. Tellingly, Green locates this perceptual shift at the moment children exited the workforce *en masse* and retreated into the segregated spaces of the school and the nursery. To lose "the child" as a productive laborer was to gain "childhood" as a productive metaphor, one that Green so eloquently describes precisely because he shares its cultural assumptions. He did not fully account for the "Golden Age," but by naming it he opened the door to later critical assessments of both the term and the historical period.

At its height, the collective dream of childhood as a "Golden Age" generated British fairy tales, fantasy, and nonsense verse. Realist American novelists such as Louisa May Alcott and Mark Twain fit only awkwardly into the paradigm, and American poets like Henry Wadsworth Longfellow were problematic because they continued to write for a dual readership of children and adults. The core group of "Golden Age" writers is thus comprised of Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll, George MacDonald, Kenneth Grahame, Beatrix Potter, Frances Hodgson Burnett, J. M. Barrie, and A. A. Milne, with grudging nods to Alcott (whose children spend too much time with adults) and E. Nesbit (who was rather too commercial). Unlike Green, Humphrey Carpenter, in *Secret Gardens: The Golden Age of Children's Literature from Alice's Adventures in Wonderland to Winnie the Pooh* (1985), attempts to historicize the "Golden Age," asking, "What was it that possessed the late Victorians and Edwardians to create a whole new genre of fiction?"

For Carpenter, childhood during the "Golden Age" was not a newly discovered country but rather a newly constructed utopia, created by adults who wanted to question mainstream society. He divides authors into two categories: "destroyers," such as Carroll and Lear, whose impulse was to attack social conventions; and "Arcadians," such as Barrie and Potter, who imagined alternative realms. These categories are useful because they allow readers to see both destroyers and Arcadians as engaged in social critiques. Curiously, however, Carpenter's wider historical analysis recapitulates the myth of a "Golden Age" even as he attempts to analyze

that myth. In his final chapter, he argues that World War I destroyed the possibility of Arcadia; he thus posits the Victorian/Edwardian era as a walled garden in which smaller walled gardens could be cultivated. In Carpenter, the boundaries between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries become as reified as the boundaries between Victorian children and Victorian adults.

One critical tension in the term “Golden Age,” then, stems from the ideal of self-containment. How unique and separate is (or was) the experience of childhood—or, for that matter, the nineteenth century? Fredric Jameson (1981) has argued that most narratives function as “strategies of containment” that mask economic processes. From this perspective, the “gold” in “Golden Age” might be traced to a mine in South Africa. Exploring these questions in *Empire’s Children*, M. Daphne Kutzer (2000) notes that “the rise of imperialism is roughly contemporaneous with the golden age of children’s literature (approximately 1860–1930), and the two grew up together.” While Kutzer does not explicitly unpack the term “Golden Age,” she does modify its sense of self-containment. Imperialism, Kutzer argues, not only organizes the British Victorian imagination, but it continues to influence children’s literature today: “The longing for empire, or at least for national importance, is reflected in children’s books both of the golden age and of our age.” Moreover, the bordered gardens and Neverlands of Arcadia were products of a British middle class that was in turn supported by an almost borderless imperial economy, so that even when “Golden Age” utopian authors were unconscious

of their privilege they still drew on that privilege. The “Golden Age,” Kutzer implies, drew on global resources even as it championed British isolationism, and the ideologies it embraced resonate beyond the world wars and beyond the borders of the British Empire.

Although Kutzer and Green map the spaces and territories of the “Golden Age,” it is crucial to note that the term imagines not just children’s spaces but also children’s bodies. Romantic poets and philosophers discarded the notion of infant depravity, moving to the opposite extreme: children were now spotless innocents trailing clouds of glory. Seen from a Romantic perspective, characters such as Mary Lennox, Peter Rabbit, Winnie-the-Pooh, and even Peter Pan can be mischievous or wrongheaded, but they cannot be evil and they cannot be sexual because they are living their own golden ages. “Golden Age” literature features protagonists of a certain “Golden Age”—not just pre-pubescent but also prelapsarian, and thus presumably walled off from base urges and adult agendas. Moreover, unlike first-generation Romantic texts, which were aimed at adults, “Golden Age” texts speak to readers who themselves represent, albeit temporarily, an innocent “golden age.”

The status of the Victorian/Edwardian child’s body points to another question raised by the “Golden Age”: Precisely who, if anyone, counts or once counted as innocent? In *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (1992), James Kincaid argues that conventional “Golden Age” images—of a walled garden, say, or a band of lost boys—are essentially erotic because they

fetishize the border between childhood and adulthood. Unlike Carpenter, Kincaid does not see “Golden Age” authors as dissenters; instead, they emerge as mainstream Victorians who were popular because they tapped into the libidinal energies of their child and adult readers. If the term “Golden Age” works to displace imperial forces, Kincaid suggests that it also displaces (but does not dissolve) the Victorian impulse to repeatedly erect and then violate the boundaries between children and adults.

Similar issues are raised by the debates surrounding Charles Dodgson’s portraits of children, which are literally bathed in the golden light of mid-century photographic technology. Dodgson’s nude photograph of nine-year-old Ellen Hatch might invite us to see her (and ourselves) as innocent, protected by the developmental “golden age” that she embodies; or, that “Golden Age” boundary might contain the ideological complications that make Dodgson’s photography—and his fiction, and indeed his era—so compelling.

If the “Golden Age” conjures images of Arcadian spaces and prelapsarian bodies, it also draws a line between the walled garden and the free market. An explosion of middle-class book-buying power may have spurred the production of “Golden Age” fictions, but within the stories themselves the Victorian mercantile economy is barely in evidence. A major exception is the work of E. Nesbit, whose Bastable children are unabashed “treasure-seekers,” but Nesbit’s status as a “Golden Age” writer is wobbly. In classical mythology, the “Golden Age” ended when Pandora opened her

jar full of chaos and discord. For the “Golden Age” of children’s literature, one perceived source of chaos and discord (along with sex) was explicit commercialism—which was not, incidentally, associated with women writers. Even in latecomer A. A. Milne’s work, commercially produced toy animals might walk and talk but they do not discuss their origins in a department store. Nesbit’s celebration of commerce (and commercial success) inspired criticism that she was a purveyor of “prosaic magic” (Green 1965) or a “hack” whose effects on children’s literature are “questionable” (Carpenter 1985). Green and Carpenter assume that authentic Romantic children should not be depicted or treated as consumers, or Arcadia will be at risk.

In sum, then, the term “Golden Age” contains or displaces late-Victorian cultural anxieties about the empire, the body, and the rise of consumerism. However, by identifying a historically specific canon, the term has also enabled later critics such as Kutzer and Kincaid to move beyond Romantic recapitulation. The key, perhaps, is historicization: if the notion of a “Golden Age” stages an escape from history, then the task of the critic involves acknowledging that no one escapes.