The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Sisters

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Introduction

What does ‘feminist’ mean? Feminist is formed with the word ‘femme,’ ‘woman,’ and means: someone who fights for women. For many of us it means someone who fights for women as a class and for the disappearance of this class.

Monique Wittig¹

Woman herself is never at issue in these statements: the feminine is defined as the necessary complement to the operation of male sexuality, and, more often, as a negative image that provides male sexuality with an unfailingly phallic self-representation.

Luce Irigaray²

This book takes as its point of departure the striking absence of girlhood in recent studies of early modern literature and drama, an absence that is particularly noteworthy in view of the considerable attention this scholarship has paid to boys. Although female children occupied a crucial and contested position in the early modern sex-gender system, our critical frameworks have not known how to account for them. We have been reading past their distinct positions as ‘girls’, ‘maids’, ‘damsels’ and ‘wenches’ by subsuming all female characters into the category of ‘women’. The result has been that feminist literary criticism has been without a critical vocabulary to counteract what Luce Irigaray calls ‘sexual (in)difference’, whereby female identities exist only as mirrors for men. Discourses of girlhood, I argue, fragmented gender categories in early modern England, producing multiple categories of femininity and femaleness; if the category of ‘women’ in early modern England was at times figured as merely a reflection of ‘men’, it was at best a fractured mirror.

Although it may seem strange to couple Wittig’s socialist theory with Irigaray’s psychoanalytical perspective in my epigraphs, I would suggest that where they come together is in their insistence that ‘woman’ and
‘women’ are multiple – ‘not one’, to use Irigaray’s formulation. Rather than being part of a single girl/woman binary, ‘girl’ was one of many terms for young female human beings in early modern English. The process of inculcating femininity and ‘making’ women was neither uniform across class nor did it happen without resistance. Along the way it also produced (among other positions) ‘girls’, ‘maids’, ‘damsels’, ‘wenches’ and ‘whores’. What looking at girls and girlhood has made clear to me is that ‘women’ and ‘femininity’ were not stable, easily defined categories and that, in fact, definitions of femininity were very much fragmented by age, class and context. As such, it seems time to rethink the two dominant scholarly models for conceptualising early modern gender and social hierarchies: (1) the triangular relationship between men, women and boys emphasised in recent scholarly explorations of early modern sexuality and sexual difference and (2) the division of the female life cycle into the categories ‘maid’, ‘wife’ and ‘widow’. Both of these triads had significant cultural currency in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but the category of the ‘girl’ exposes their limitations. When we ignore girls, and, indeed, when we ignore female human beings who do not fit into the category of ‘woman’, we unwittingly buy into the patriarchal narrative that depends upon collapsing differences between female identities in order to define male identities against them.

The category of the ‘girl’, on the other hand, disrupts the reified female identity categories on which both models were based and that contemporary literary criticism has unwittingly reproduced. In 1989, Stephen Orgel voiced a question that would preoccupy scholars of Renaissance literature for more than two decades: ‘Why Did the English Stage Take Boys for Women?’ Orgel was one of several forward-looking scholars in the late 1980s who recognised the importance of Shakespeare’s transvestite theatre to the interpretation of his plays. His simply put question – he called it ‘crude’ – led to anything but simple answers, and even after more than twenty years, no consensus has been reached. For Orgel, the ‘real question’ was how early modern culture constructed sex and gender, an issue that he tackled in even more depth in his subsequent monograph, Impersonations. Like most exciting scholarly issues, Orgel’s question required historical and cultural interpretation rather than bare facts, and it opened up conversations between competing schools of thought. The terms of that conversation, however, limited the kind of inquiries that could be made. One reason female children have been marginalised in literary criticism is that the term ‘girl’ has been missing from our analytical vocabularies. Behind Orgel’s question lie several others: if the English stage took boys for women, where did
the girls fit in? Did the English stage take boys for girls, and what difference did that make? And how did the gendering of girls take place in early modern culture more generally?

I have chosen to focus on Orgel’s work not to scapegoat him, but because his question so clearly illustrates the critical blind spot that the overwhelming emphasis on boys and women has produced in early modern studies. I also want to suggest that his work offers a way to think past that blind spot. Orgel’s feminist analysis has laid the groundwork necessary to begin answering these questions. He has convincingly argued that unlike our modern male/female binary that pits men against women, the early modern sex-gender system was organised around a tripartite distinction that defined mature men against women and boys. As Rosalind in William Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* suggests, both boys and women were feminised in the early modern imagination. Claiming to have cured a lovesick youth by posing as his mistress, Rosalind tells Orlando:

He was to imagine me his love, his mistress; and I set him every day to woo me. At which time would I, being but a moonish youth, grieve, be effeminate, changeable, longing and liking, proud, fantastical, apish, shallow, inconstant, full of tears, full of smiles, for every passion something and for no passion truly anything, as boys and women are for the most part cattle of this colour. (3.2.395–403)

As a boy playing a female character playing a boy, Rosalind both enacts and articulates the connection between boys and women on the early modern stage and in early modern culture. Men occupied the highest tier in the overall social hierarchy, and boys and women occupied similar subject positions below. They were both, as Rosalind says, objects of exchange and erotic attraction for adults. This model of gender construction hierarchised adult men’s masculinity over the femininity and effeminacy of the other two categories.

The tripartite model has a powerful explanatory force for drama, but the danger of stopping with this comparison between boys and women – and the danger of stopping with the tripartite distinction in general – is that the category ‘women’ appears stable, fixed and natural compared to the developmental trajectory between ‘boys’ and ‘men’. That is to say, it doesn’t account for Simone de Beauvoir’s observation that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman. As Beauvoir points out, female human beings are shaped as ‘women’ in a lived encounter with a patriarchal world. Her central insight, in Toril Moi’s words, is that ‘the fact of being born with a female body starts a process which will have specific, yet unforeseeable consequences . . . To Beauvoir the relationship
between one’s body and one’s subjectivity is neither necessary nor arbitrary but contingent. This contingent interplay between an individual woman’s experiences and gender norms could not be accommodated in the tripartite model, which depended upon marking ‘women’ as ‘women’ to stabilise gender categories within a system of social control. It could not articulate the ways a boy playing a young female character would have been gendered differently from a boy playing an adult woman.

I do not want to fall into the trap against which Toril Moi rightly cautions of assuming that we can never use the words ‘women’ or ‘girls’ without quotation marks, or of confusing constructivism with liberation. To avoid this, Moi suggests turning to Beauvoir, whose philosophy was neither radically constructivist nor, conversely, essentialist in the usual sense; Beauvoir saw the possession of a female body as what laid the groundwork for being made into a ‘woman’, but she did not see the female body as carrying any ‘necessary social and political consequences’. If Beauvoir believed in biology, she did not believe biology was destiny. However, having a female body does not necessarily make one a ‘woman’. As Wittig importantly points out, the category ‘women’ has historically and in certain contexts excluded a range of people because of race, class, age and sexual orientation, and recent attention to transgender identities has made it clear that what constitutes a female body can be just as controversial as what constitutes the social category of ‘women’. If Beauvoir was willing to include anyone with a female body, early modern society was not.

One way to start dismantling the universalising and often exclusionary uses of ‘woman’ as a conceptual category is to look at the other feminine identities in relation to which it has been defined. What began as a question of location in this project (where were the girls in early modern literature, and how did they fit into the sex-gender system?) quickly became a question of meaning: what was an early modern girl, or at least what did I mean by ‘girl’ when I asked that question? Whether or not we see girls as absent or present depends very much upon how we define them, and the question becomes no easier if we substitute the phrase ‘female children’, since the definition of ‘child’ was no more stable in this period than ‘woman’ or ‘girl’. The heavy reliance on canonical drama has also compounded the absence of female children in our critical discussions because there is a general perception that girl characters, unlike boys, were scarce. Of the roughly forty-five children in Mark Lawhorn’s annotated checklist of children in Shakespeare’s plays, only four are girls, and the appearance of Clarence’s daughter in Richard III has been deemed unusual by the few critics who mention her. Yet
the use of female infants on stage was not unknown (my appendix to
Chapter 3 includes seven in addition to the three well-known examples
of Perdita, Marina and Elizabeth I in Shakespeare’s plays), nor were
teenage daughters scarce. The female child we think is missing from
early modern drama is a particular type of female child: the modern,
pre-adolescent girl who functions predominantly as a child. She walks
and talks, receives an education and participates in social relations, but
her role is not predominantly sexual or romantic. By and large, the most
well-known examples of young female characters on the public stage do
not correspond to our notion of what counts as a ‘girl’; instead, the most
frequently discussed stage narratives focus on young women’s entrance
into the heterosexual marriage market, in part because of the generic
demands of romantic comedy.

My approach to this problem at first was to expand my notion of
who counted as a girl, a methodological approach that I found enor-
mously generative. Juliet, for example, certainly gets called a ‘girl’, as
do Katherina in Taming of the Shrew, Jessica in Merchant of Venice,
Rosalind in As You Like It, Miranda in The Tempest and Lavinia in
Titus Andronicus. However, using this approach exclusively would
leave unanswered the perceived absence of little girls from early
modern drama. What we find lacking in canonical Renaissance drama,
especially in Shakespeare, is the kind of childhood stories that Mary
Cowden Clarke provided in The Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Heroines,
first published between 1850 and 1852 and then as a five-volume col-
lected edition. Cowden Clarke’s fifteen narrative prequels offer psycho-
logical portraits of Shakespeare’s female characters as children. The
title alone grips the imagination with the promise of revealing how
Shakespeare’s women became who they are; the title also implies that
the girlhood of Shakespeare’s heroines exists outside of the plays. As
Cowden Clarke reminds her readers in the preface of the 1874 edition,
‘here, [Shakespeare’s] women are in their girlhood, – these are their
“sallet days,” when they are “green in judgment,” – immature, – but the
opening buds of the future “bright consummate flowers” which he has
given to us in immortal bloom.’12 In her tales, we get to see Katherina
from Taming of the Shrew be tied up, Ophelia from Hamlet witness the
death of her good friend in childbirth, and Mistress Quickly’s mother
make a proto-feminist argument against her husband’s preference for
male children. The stories are fascinating, and they exert an undeniable
influence over the way we understand Shakespeare’s plays, effectively
acting as a form of literary criticism.

The Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Heroines participated in two
widespread phenomena in late nineteenth-century culture: the rise
of Shakespearean character criticism and the fetishisation of female childhood. The Victorian propensity to treat Shakespeare’s characters as real people – to psychologise them and describe their actions as if they took place in history rather than in drama – resulted in a wide variety of essays on Shakespeare’s men and women in which the writers identify with them as examples of the human experience. Victorian women, as Gail Marshall has shown, actively engaged with Shakespeare both in their educations and in literary criticism, ‘negotiating their Shakespearean legacy and attempting to plot its meaning for themselves and for their culture’. Before Cowden Clarke, women like Anna Jameson penned essays exploring the moral characters of Shakespeare’s heroines as studies in Victorian ideals of womanhood. Cowden Clarke’s fictional intervention into Shakespeare’s world had a similar preoccupation. For Cowden Clarke, Shakespeare could not ever truly have represented girls because she saw his heroines as embodying ideal womanhood, with his plays showing them to us ‘in the meridian blaze of perfection’. They could not, regardless of their ages, truly be associated with the immaturity she associates with girlhood and still be Shakespeare’s heroines.

Cowden Clarke’s sense that girls are missing from Shakespeare is a product of this Victorian construction of girlhood. Like all readings, however, these tales can shut down other interpretations by suggesting that we need to look outside Shakespeare’s plays, and outside early modern literature, to find representations of girls instead of recognising that early modern culture defined girlhood and childhood differently from the way Cowden Clarke did in the nineteenth century and differently from the way we do today. Nonetheless, the title of this book quite obviously combines Mary Cowden Clarke’s title with a reference to Virginia Woolf’s story about Shakespeare’s sister Judith. It was reading Mary Cowden Clarke (in an undergraduate class not coincidentally named ‘Shakespeare’s Sisters’) that set me up to wonder years later where to find the girls in English Renaissance literature. Her sense that they were absent from Shakespeare prompted me to look for them, to wonder whether their girlhoods looked anything like Woolf’s vision of Judith Shakespeare. While Cowden Clarke was concerned that Shakespeare’s women did not have recorded girlhoods, Virginia Woolf was concerned that women in Shakespeare’s time had nothing but girlhoods. The story of Shakespeare’s sister in A Room of One’s Own is that of a little girl who grows up wanting to write but who finds herself excluded from literary culture. It ends with her committing suicide after her literary ambitions have been thwarted by her culture’s restricted roles for women. Although Woolf visited the reading room of the
British Museum in search of answers about women’s history and literary accomplishments, she, like Cowden Clarke, ultimately relied on fiction to fill in the gaps in the historical record available to her, a move that has inspired a great deal of feminist recovery work but that has also, as Margaret Ezell cautions, led to some distortions in the way we write women’s literary history. Woolf’s preference for professional women writers and her privileging of printed books obscured the extent to which women participated in manuscript circulation, which in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England was ‘the standard, traditional form of intellectual exchange for men and women’ and was not a private form of literary production. Likewise, the desire to find the independent adult women writers that Woolf wants girls like Judith Shakespeare to have had the opportunity to become has directed attention away from female childhood. Using the expanded archive of materials that is now available, this book offers an alternative vision of the construction of early modern girlhood, one that seeks to approach it on its own terms while still holding on to Cowden Clarke’s interest in fictional characterisation and Woolf’s concern for the historical conditions of girls and women in Shakespeare’s world.

So what then was an early modern girl? For my purposes in Chapters 1 and 2, a girl is a ‘girl’ when she is called one, because otherwise she is a ‘maid’ or a ‘damsel’ or a ‘wench’ or a ‘lass’ or any one of the other host of terms in early modern English used to constitute and name a female human being as a female human being. The reason I have taken this approach is that I have become increasingly aware of the efficacy of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s observation that ‘the meaning of a word is its use in the language’. Words come to mean what they mean because speakers use them in particular speech acts, and the central tenet of this book is that calling a person a ‘girl’ in early modern England constituted her as feminine in a way that was different from calling her a ‘woman’ or a ‘lass’ or a ‘maid’.

As I show in Chapter 1, ‘girl’ was part of a rich vocabulary of female youth that was multiple, complex and multivalent. The multiplicity of positions available to female human beings in language was part of the challenge that the discourse of girlhood posed to the second triad that this book is looking to complicate, that of the ‘maid’, ‘wife’ and ‘widow’. This linear marital progression is the traditional way scholars have studied women’s life cycles, but feminist historians have frequently expressed discomfort with the way this categorisation defines women according to their (hetero)sexual and marital status. Even the truly excellent work on single women that has come out in the past few years still conceptualises female lives in terms of their lack of a husband,
thereby normalising marriage as the default path.\textsuperscript{19} The benefit of thinking about female lives via girlhood is that it does not automatically figure them in terms of their marital status.

Whereas a large body of feminist literary criticism has focused on early modern women broadly speaking, or on young women as daughters, maids, virgins or marriageable romantic heroines, I turn to the category of the ‘girl’ to recognise the ways early modern writers mediated the gap between what women were supposed to be and the historical conditions in which they lived. Following the Protestant Reformation, the dominant religious ideology constructed all women as ‘married or to be married’,\textsuperscript{20} and the dissolution of the monasteries meant that women could no longer choose the Church as a vocation. However, as Amy Louise Erickson points out, most adult women were unmarried at any given time in early modern England either because they were widowed or because they had never been married.\textsuperscript{21} This contradiction, as well as the elimination of virginity as an institutionally sanctioned life path, produced a linguistic tension over the inapplicability of terms like ‘maid’ and ‘wife’ to female individuals whose lives challenged the social and legal fiction that all women would proceed from virginity to marriage to widowhood. While the culture reconfigured its perceptions of women’s life cycles, the fluidity of the discourse of girlhood opened up imaginative opportunities for constructing female identities that cut across those rigid categories. Far from being the only way of organising women’s life stages, the ‘maid, wife, widow’ triad was constantly dissolving in the face of an alternative vocabulary.

Chapter 1 accordingly begins at the level of language and charts the emergence of ‘girl’ into early modern English, tracing two major shifts in the development of the vocabulary of female youth. The first shift began in the early sixteenth century and involved the proliferation of specialised terms for female children. Following this period of elaboration, a second shift took place in the mid-seventeenth century, when ‘girl’ and the other terms in its semantic network began to be defined as separate categories of female youth. ‘Girl’ subsequently came to be defined as the female age category that it largely is today. In the transitional period, however, ‘girl’ functioned more as a gender category than as an age category, and a ‘girl’ could be anyone from a female infant to an unruly adult. This flexibility, I argue, provided the terminology necessary for writers like Thomas Heywood to describe dynamic, subversive female characters like Bess Bridges, the cross-dressing heroine of \textit{The Fair Maid of the West, or a Girl Worth Gold} (c. 1600). Rather than following a linear progression from ‘maid’ to ‘wife’ to ‘widow’, Bess moves between categories of female identity. She can be a ‘maid’ – a young and virtuous
virgin – but also a ‘wench’, a ‘sweet lass’, a ‘tanner’s daughter’, ‘a she-drawer’ and ‘a girl worth gold’.

Having examined the vocabulary of girlhood in the first chapter, in the second chapter I investigate the way the discourse of girlhood produced gendered identities. Will Fisher’s work on the prosthetic markers of masculinity has shown that early modern culture perceived boys as differently gendered from men, marking them off from the realm of adult masculinity through their beardlessness and other sexual characteristics. Early modern culture likewise perceived girls as differently gendered from women. Fisher in fact anticipated this study in one of his footnotes, remarking, ‘It may well be . . . that there was a corresponding split in the production of femininity in early modern England, in which case sexual distinctions would have been fourfold.’ What I have discovered is that the split in the production of femininity did not produce a fourfold model but rather pulled apart the tripartite one. Girls did not fit into the sex-gender system so much as they disrupted it. By offering an alternative construction of femininity, girlishness exposed womanhood as a social backformation. I use the description of female characters as ‘girls’ in George Gascoigne’s *The Adventures of Master F. J.*, Shakespeare’s *The First Part of Henry the Sixth* and Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker’s *The Roaring Girl* to show that early modern writers turned to the category of the ‘girl’ to account for female characters who were not only sexually but also, more importantly, socially and politically resistant to occupying their womanly place within the social hierarchy.

 Whereas Chapters 1 and 2 focus on the ways girlhood functioned as a discursive gender category, my last three chapters focus on representations of female childhood. In moving from ‘girl’ in quotation marks to one aspect of the way ‘girl’ could be used – as a designation for female infants and children – I am making a conscious decision to pick up on the tensions between the way ‘girl’ functioned as a signifier that could indicate unruly femininity without regard to age and its simultaneous associations with female youth. To look at female children, then, is to provide the other side of the story. Early modern drama and life writing participated in the construction of girlhood as a particularly gendered time of life, and my final chapters explore the way ‘the girl’ could be represented as a particularly gendered kind of child.

Chapter 3 looks at female infants in early modern drama. Shakespeare’s *Pericles, The Winter’s Tale* and *Henry VIII* and Thomas Middleton’s *A Fair Quarrel* and *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* were part of a minor vogue on the early seventeenth-century stage for using infants as stage props. Using these plays as a starting point, I argue that early
modern representations tend to figure infants as problematically gendered and, consequently, as problematically human. By exploring the connections between childhood and gender in performance via infancy, this chapter circumvents the absence of female bodies from the stage to explore the way early modern notions of humanity were rooted in a language of gender. To be spoken of as human, I argue, was to be spoken of as male or female.

Although initially I believed that, aside from infants, female children rarely appeared on the early modern stage, it turned out that young girl characters were not entirely absent; I just needed to look a little harder for them. To date, I have found seventeen plays that include young girls coded as what we would call pre-adolescent children. Like infants, young, pre-adolescent girls appear regularly in plays, from interludes to masques, but the distinctions between girlhood and womanhood can be more difficult to uncover because female life stages were less public and textually documented than male ones. As a result, much of what has been written as the history of childhood in pre-modern Europe has actually been the history of boyhood. ‘Boys’, as Philippe Ariès rightly pointed out in 1960, ‘were the first specialized children.’ This does not mean, however, that childhood was the peculiar province of boys, or that female children did not experience childhood; in fact, it suggests something quite different – that childhood was viewed as feminine and that boys were being differentiated from the generic category of the ‘child’. Scholars were once tempted to relegate Ariès to the academic dustbin, but recent historians of childhood have come to recognise his fundamental contributions to the field. His most eloquent apologist is Hugh Cunningham, who acknowledges the problems with Ariès’s methodology but finds his questions, and indeed many of his answers, compelling. As Cunningham points out, Ariès’s greatest contribution to the history of childhood was his insistence that childhood had a history. Like Cunningham, I see Ariès as offering crucial insights into the shifting construction of childhood in the seventeenth century. What Ariès means when he calls boys specialised children is that they were initiated into a separate cultural sphere where schooling and education isolated them from adult cares while also preparing them for their future lives as men. This difference was expressed in their clothing and marked by their transition from coats to breeches. Girls, on the other hand, ‘were distinguished [from adult women] only by the false sleeves, abandoned in the eighteenth century, as if childhood separated girls from adult life less than it did boys.’ Ariès correctly points out that in England girls went to petty schools, but not to grammar schools, and they had no equivalent ceremony to the breeching of boys.
The problem with Ariès’s formulation of his argument is that it works against his historicist aims. He takes a static definition of childhood and talks about its emergence and absence rather than uncovering the existence of different constructions of childhood over time, adopting a fossilised vision of childhood that carries over into his analysis of gender difference. Ariès defines childhood by the experience of boys, talking as if girls could not have had one simply because theirs did not correspond as closely to modern notions of childhood as the experiences of early modern boys. What I would point out is that rather than making girls un-childlike, the social structures of their childhoods were actually very much in keeping with the existing constructions of early modern childhood that Ariès represents as gradually being superseded over the course of the early modern period.27

For girlhood to become a distinctly gendered life-stage, childhood first had to be disassociated from femininity and femaleness in general, a process that should be seen as part of a larger trend traced by historians of childhood. Although scholars continue to disagree about the chronological development of the sentimental idea of the child, most agree that the Western world’s view of childhood changed at some point after the sixteenth century.28 Adults no longer saw childhood as a period to be got through as quickly as possible and instead saw it as a state of innocence to be preserved and protected. For historians of girlhood like Sally Mitchell, the full fruition of this shift came with the late Victorian production of a separate culture for girls, including special books, clubs, sports and schools, a movement in which Mary Cowden Clarke participated by writing about girls and positioning Shakespeare as girls’ literature. In an article for the Girl’s Own Paper in 1887, Cowden Clarke suggests that Shakespeare is a ‘poet-teacher’ whose female characters serve as examples of how young women should behave. She writes, ‘To the young girl, emerging from childhood and taking her first step into the more active and self-dependent career of woman-life, Shakespeare’s vital precepts and models render him essentially a helping friend.’29 As Mitchell convincingly demonstrates, this new sphere of girlhood became a kind of ‘provisional free space’ for young women before they entered into the full patriarchal world of womanhood and marriage.30

The difference between the Victorian culture of girlhood and the phenomenon that I am describing is that the goal of ‘girling’ and ‘boying’ children in the early modern period was usually not to preserve their childhoods but to propel them toward adult manhood and womanhood. As Cunningham points out, one of the hallmarks of child-centred culture was that it downplayed sexual distinctions in favour of an idealised ungendered child who had not yet fallen into the adult world of
sexual relations. This contrasts with the early modern perception of all children as feminised, although the language of the seventeenth century shows a movement toward specifying children’s gender rather than obscuring it.

It was not, however, that female children were undifferentiated from adult women, as a simplistic interpretation might imply; their progress into adulthood was simply less culturally and textually legible because it was imagined as continuous rather than initiated by a sharp break. As Anne Buck notes in her history of children’s costume, ‘For girls there was no break with childhood comparable with the breeching of boys; they passed gradually into adult fashion.’ Nonetheless, growing older made a material difference to female lives. The Lawes Resolution of Women’s Rights (1632), for example, records the different ages at which young women received legal rights, including the ages at which they could consent to marriage, lay claim to inherited property, and escape the legal compulsion to serve as apprentices. Bodily changes would also have brought about tangible differences in girls’ lives. Early modern ideas about the physical maturation of girls can be found in midwifery manuals, which recognised that girls were physically different from adult women. When Jane Sharp distinguishes between the bodies of pre-pubertal girls and mature women’s bodies in The Midwives Book (1671), she links the physical differences to the onset of the menses: ‘The womb is small in Maids, and less than their bladder, neither is the hollow compleat but groweth bigger as the body doth. In Maids of ripe years it is not much bigger than you can comprehend in your hand; unless when they come to be with Child, yet it grows by reason of their courses.’ Sharp imagines this physical transformation as taking place over time, but she still portrays girls’ bodies as materially specific to female youth rather than as miniature versions of adult women. Like Beauvoir, Sharp’s manual exhibits an awareness that girls become women and that female bodies and female identities change over time. The recognition of biological differences between female bodies (even the same person’s female body) works against the conflation of all female human beings into the same social category.

Historians generally agree, however, that menarche was neither a rite of passage nor an absolute break with youth. Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford specifically do not organise their discussion of women’s life cycles around such physical changes. They write, ‘The physical rites de passage – menarche, pregnancy, and menopause – have not been used as markers of stages, because we found no women who conceptualized their lives in those terms.’ Nonetheless, although not as readily visible as the beards Will Fisher associates with Renaissance
masculinity, the onset of menstruation fulfilled a similar role as a marker of reproductive maturity. In *The Historie of Life and Death*, Francis Bacon explicitly associates menstruation in women with the development of beards in men – both signs of reproductive capacity. Noting that male and female children go through puberty at ‘about twelve or fourteen years of age’, Bacon locates the transition to adulthood for both men and women in the development of reproductive ability. ‘To be able for generation’ is the first consequence of puberty, followed by ‘the flowing of the menstrua, to have hairs about the legs and arm-holes, to put forth a beard’. The rest of Bacon’s discussion of ‘the difference of youth and old age’ focuses on male-specific life changes, but he interestingly conflates the acquisition of gendered secondary sex characteristics. Moreover, he even marks the cessation of the menses and lost reproductive capacity as a marker of old age. Legal and medical texts make it clear that the absence of differentiation in dress did not mean that other forms of differentiation did not take place.

As childhood became less associated with femininity in general and split instead into boyhood and girlhood (two different types of childhood), what I see happening is a move to figure ‘girls’ in more modern terms. However, our own positive associations with what it means to have ‘an idea of childhood’ should not blind us to the historical implications of what it meant for girls to be considered specialised children. What Ariès describes as a *sentiment of childhood* might more properly be termed what Cunningham identifies as a ‘middle-class ideology of childhood’, a set of beliefs held together by the elevation of the affective, nuclear family: ‘At the heart of this ideology lay a firm commitment to the view that children should be reared in families, a conviction that the way childhood was spent was crucial in determining the kind of adult that the child would become, and an increasing awareness that childhood had rights and privileges of its own.’ What has been largely unrecognised (aside from Cunningham) is that whatever else Ariès argued about the idea of childhood in the seventeenth century, he did not see it as unequivocally positive. Of the modern family Ariès wrote, ‘This family has advanced in proportion as sociability has retreated . . . Everywhere it reinforced private life at the expense of neighbourly relationships, friendships, and traditional contacts.’ The nuclear family, built around the special category of the child, comes at the expense of sociability. For Ariès, this loss represents a high price.

The construction of girlhood in the Renaissance, I am suggesting, also undergoes historical changes that come with a high price. In Chapter 4, I offer a literary history that charts the broad historical trajectory of the way early modern dramatic genres positioned female children in
the context of competing understandings of childhood. I argue that the subversive potential of girlishness on the early modern stage became neutralised as girlhood became increasingly defined as a time of life rather than a gendered state of being, and this shift can be traced in the gradual decline of dynamic girl characters in morality plays and interludes to the later public stage genres of comedy, history and tragedy. Dramatists do not seem to have been interested in staging the process through which infants became girls, or girls became women, but the earlier morality plays include a number of fully realised female children. With the introduction of the purpose-built theatres in London, the vocal ‘naughty girls’ of Tudor interludes like Dalila in *Nice Wanton* and Abra in *Jacob and Esau* gave way to static, mostly silent female children who functioned predominantly as sentimental objects. When drama sought to emphasise the adult social world rather than the individual’s spiritual development, the potential of girlhood for disruption and subversion became significantly less palpable. The stronger the association between girls and the middle-class ideology of childhood, the less prominent the voices of girl characters became on the stage.

Because the representation of girls’ voices in drama was filtered through the perspective of male playwrights, my final chapter focuses on the way women represented their own childhoods, raising questions about where and how girls spoke in early modern writing and what kinds of cultural work their voices did. If coming-of-age stories were largely absent from public drama, they were not absent from women’s writing. In contrast to the static, predominantly symbolic role that female children played on the public stage, female youth appears prominently in early modern life writing. An autobiographical letter by Margaret Clifford, Lady Grace Mildmay’s private writings, Lady Anne Clifford’s diary and Rose Throckmorton’s manuscript *Certain Old Storyes* provide some access to girls’ voices, albeit mediated through the retrospective lens of adult memories. I read these texts to think about the way girls and girlhood functioned as part of broader strategies for narrating female lives. At the very least, this genre of women’s writing enables us to see how some women constructed their own girlhoods as gendered experiences and how they saw them as producing their future identities as adult women. Although much of this book focuses on the way girls were represented in men’s writing, Chapter 5 seeks to give space to the women who had first-hand knowledge of what it meant to be a girl in early modern England.

Having set out to find girls in early modern literature, I seem to have found them everywhere, lurking in popular plays and buried in obscure pamphlets. At the same time, the more I see them, the more I realise that
'girls', like ‘women’, occupy an unstable place in a network of shifting gender identities. The category of the ‘girl’ was neither monolithic nor easily defined; the fair maid and the golden girl, the female infant on the stage, the saucy servant in a Tudor interlude and the great-great-granddaughter copying her ancestor’s autobiography were all part of a society in which girlhood was under construction. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English writers struggled to articulate their understandings of female youth, and girls in turn challenged them to renegotiate the boundaries of the sex-gender system. What follows is an attempt to rise to their challenge.

Notes


6. This and all future Shakespeare quotations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from The Norton Shakespeare, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard and Katharine Eisaman Maus (New York: Norton, 1997).


8. Ibid. p. 37.


10. For a discussion of the way that trans women have had their bodies and social identities questioned and excluded by contemporary feminists, see Julia Serrano, Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007).


27. Ibid. pp. 41–78.
28. Cunningham, *Children and Childhood*, pp. 61–74. Cunningham dates the shift toward child-centred culture to the eighteenth century, although he acknowledges that it has roots in the preceding centuries. Margaret L. King, on the other hand, cites a scholarly consensus that changes began in the
seventeenth century. In contrast, Linda Pollock and Nicholas Orme stress
the continuity of the past with the present, seeing pre-modern attitudes
toward children as similar to today’s. Pollock focuses on the treatment of
actual children by adults. Orme is likewise interested in actual children’s
lives more than the concept of childhood, as is Barbara Hanawalt, who
provides one of the most sustained analyses of the impact of gender on
medieval children in her Growing up in Medieval London: The Experience

29. Mary Cowden Clarke, ‘Shakespeare as the Girl’s Friend’, in Ann Thompson
and Sasha Roberts (eds), Women Reading Shakespeare, 1660–1900
at York University in Toronto is currently working on a study of early
modern girlhood entitled Girls Own Shakespeare that will examine both
constructions of female childhood in the period and Shakespeare as girls’
literature.

York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 3. See also Jane Hunter, How
Young Ladies Became Girls: The Victorian Origins of American Girlhood

31. Cunningham, Children and Childhood, p. 75.

32. It is worth noting that the absolute break between boyhood and manhood
was fictional. Boys, like girls, went through other transitional phases, such
as weaning, teething and learning to walk, and they also switched into dou-
blets before leaving off skirts for breeches. Moreover, breeching was not
irreversible; a young boy could be put in breeches for a special occasion and
then returned to coats until he was older, and the age of breeching varied
depending upon family tradition, personal sentiment and the boy’s height.

33. Although the modern observer often has difficulty determining the gender
of children in early modern portraits, girls and boys were sometimes dis-
tinguished through subtle markers. For accounts of the differences between
children’s attire and adult fashion and of the differences between the dress
of boys and girls, see Anne Buck, Clothes and the Child: A Handbook of
Children’s Dress in England 1500–1900 (New York: Holmes & Meier,
1996), and Jan Baptist Bedaux and Rudi Ekkart (eds), Pride and Joy:
Children’s Portraits in the Netherlands 1500–1700 (Amsterdam: Ludion
Press, 2000).

34. Jane Sharp, The Midwives Book, or the Whole Art of Midwifry Discovered,


36. Will Fisher argues that beards are a prosthetic marker of masculinity, and
he shows that beards were believed to be a sign of reproductive capacity.
See especially his chapter ‘The Renaissance Beard: Masculinity in Early
Modern England’ in Fisher, Materializing Gender, pp. 32–79.

37. Francis Bacon, The Historie of Life and Death, in The Works of Francis

38. The age of the onset of menstruation was rarely recorded, but it appears
to have been later than today. Menarche may have occurred as late as
sixteen or seventeen, and Simon Forman records that his wife did not get
her ‘courses’ until after their marriage. When she does, Forman enthusi-
