The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Sisters
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In 1598, an eight-year-old Anne Clifford composed a letter to her father George, requesting his blessing and assuring him of her daughterly duty. Although brief, the letter was written on beautifully decorated paper with a border of colourful flowers, clearly indicating that it was an elaborate offering rather than a casual note. She wrote:

I humbly intreate your blessing and euer comend my duety and seruice to your Lo: praying I may be made happy by your loue I comend my seruice and leaue my trobling of your Lo: being your
Daughter in all
obedient duety
Anne Clifford

The tone of this letter is difficult to determine. The formality of addressing her father as ‘your Lordship’ follows early modern protocols of respect between aristocratic children and their parents, and it could indicate either a coldly official relationship or warm daughterly affection. It could be the writing of a girl going through the motions of pleasing an adult, or it could be the genuine expression of a passionate child. My own initial reaction to the letter was that it gives us very little insight into the child Anne’s subjectivity, but I had to rethink my perspective when I came across a brochure for a June 2012 embroidery retreat in honour of Lady Anne Clifford where the internationally renowned needleworkers Phillipa Turnbull, Jane Nicholas, OAM, and Meredith Willett offered to teach students the techniques necessary to reproduce designs from early modern Britain, including one inspired by the flowers on Anne’s letter to her father. The brochure describes the letter not as the formal exercise that I initially saw, but as the work of ‘a lonely 8 year old Lady Anne to her father, imploring him not to be away from home so much and to be a better father’. As an academic, I am bound by scholarly conventions that prevent me from making such
bold claims about Anne’s feelings, but the brochure’s interpretation made me pause and realise that my own dismissal of the letter stemmed from preconceived ideas about what children’s writing sounds like and what forms of expression their affection should take. I cannot prove that Anne’s letter was an impassioned plea for her father to love her, but I also cannot prove that it was not. It is precisely because I want to hear the personal, intimate voice of Anne Clifford as a child that I find the letter’s formality disappointing.

For me, as for other scholars of early modern girls and women, the ‘desire to speak with the dead’ remains a powerful but ultimately elusive fantasy. The feminist recovery projects of the 1970s and 1980s have given us a much richer variety of women’s texts from which to choose, including some texts by children like Anne Clifford, but those voices do not offer unfettered access to the lived experiences of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century women. If the female writers of letters, diaries, mother’s advice manuals and religious meditations have the power to speak to us, they are not speaking in unmediated ways. They are fashioning their lives according to a complex set of generic and cultural influences, ultimately telling us their stories via an inherited set of narrative conventions. Well before any of these women put quill pen to paper, they would have encountered ideas about what a woman’s life story looks like, and those ideas would have shaped the narrative possibilities of their own speaking voices.

This is especially true of girls. Although examples of early modern girls’ writing have survived, they often display a certain amount of opacity. In addition to her plays, Rachel Fane left behind a notebook that included copies of Latin and Spanish grammars, French translation exercises, and a list of behaviours and traits that are ‘comly for a virgin’, including platitudes such as ‘A kinde nature winneth loue, but a stubborne spirit is a plague to reason’. Her manuscripts tell us much about her education, but they reveal a limited amount about how she felt about that education and how she saw her identity as a female child. Equally conventional are the ‘Verses made by a Maid under 14’, published with two other poems in the 1650s. Robert C. Evans has praised the writer’s grasp of scripture, her strong use of iambic pentameter and her ability to avoid forced rhyme, but her identity remains elusive and her sentiments are largely no different from those expressed in adult women’s religious verse. She maintains the expected disdain for ‘this world’ as ‘filthy drosse’ and precociously calls for the Lord to ‘Come quickly . . . / That I from sin may turn away’. What we see in this girl’s poem is her willing assimilation into early modern religious discourse, an important part of the experience of many early modern children.
Though the writer does not dramatise her identity as a child, it was clearly important to the publisher to mark the verses by the ‘Maid under 14’ as written by a young girl, regardless of the content, and that signals that there was a cultural value to advertising a text as emanating from a female child. The book capitalises on the poet’s youth in order to render the otherwise conventional sentiments remarkable because they demonstrate such strong piety in one so young. The poem does not create a sense of great intimacy between the audience and the poet, but that was not its goal. Moreover, as Kate Chedgzoy argues, Rachel Fane’s copying of platitudes is at odds with the vivacious and imaginative literary works that she produced, which suggests that the copying of such ‘blandly formulaic advice’ may not have had as deep an influence as it might seem at first blush, and that ‘the uses to which literacy may be put cannot be so easily contained and controlled’.8

In looking at young girls as writers, I find myself caught in the questions about children and mimesis that Michael Witmore has explored with regard to child performers both in Elizabethan pageants and on the public stage.9 Early modern culture clearly understood that children could memorise and repeat elaborate texts, but their skills raised questions about whether they were simply mimicking the language they had heard (like parrots) or truly understood (and believed) the content. Even when approaching historical material with a desire not to map contemporary assumptions about what children should sound like on to the past, it can be hard to maintain objectivity. At its heart, this book seeks to replace an absence with a presence, both the absence of girls from contemporary critical discourse and the absence of girls in our historical view of early modern literature and culture. To do so, however, risks mystifying the processes through which girls became speaking subjects. Recent work on gender and autobiography have reconfigured the self who writes as a discursive production dependent on linguistic, generic and cultural factors.10 This chapter accordingly seeks to pay attention to narrative conventions in order to examine female life stories without resorting to essentialist models wherein young women’s writing produces transparent lenses into female experiences. Instead, what interests me is the way that early modern texts produced girls’ perspectives in order to label them as girls’ perspectives. The women whose lives I explore in this chapter largely see their childhoods as conventional and figure their own agencies in terms of their ability to conform to proper gender roles. This is partly a function of the fact that so much of women’s life writing focuses on members of the aristocracy or gentry, and the writers have a class-based investment in maintaining the status quo. Even a woman like Anne Clifford, who stood firm against James I’s
attempts to coerce her into giving up her claims to her father’s property, figures her actions as operating within conservative patriarchal standards rather than against them. These texts sought to stabilise the category of the ‘girl’ by projecting her into the past, writing girlhood as a bounded time of life when girls were learning about the world around them but had not yet been granted a social voice.

Nonetheless, women’s life writing, with its attention to the age differences between girls and women, still poses a challenge to the tripartite model of the early modern sex-gender system. Women’s coming-of-age stories make it clear that an idea of female childhood existed and that, just as boys became men, girls became women. These texts also clearly reveal that, while marriage was an important event in women’s lives, the maturation process involved a wide variety of cultural moments, from putting on a girl’s first pair of stays to experiencing a difficult sickness to reading with her governess. These women’s texts, however, differ from male-authored drama in their figuration of childhood; in women’s life writing, the transgressive girlishness of the stage remained largely undesirable. To look beyond the tripartite model and the ‘maid, wife, widow’ schema is not to insist that early modern women were not bound by patriarchal constraints; when women remember their childhoods, they are generally using them to construct a sense of themselves as part of the existing social fabric rather than seeking to rend that fabric apart. Consequently, they see girlhood as part of a narrative, with female children fulfilling narrative functions. In some works, the progression from childhood to adulthood provides the text with an organising principal, beginning with infancy and childhood and ending with old age or death. More often, however, the writers use girlish experiences to explain how the woman in question became the woman she is, making her girlish self prefigure the future woman. Her positive traits become evidence for proving the worth of the adult woman as well as offering an ideal model for how young girls should be raised. Women’s lives in these texts were made as much as they were experienced. By putting autobiographical works in dialogue with each other, this chapter sees life writing as part of a constellation of generic strategies for narrating female lives that worked quite differently from the tripartite model.11

Although women’s autobiographies and diaries are relatively scarce until the later seventeenth century, several manuscripts contain descriptions of girlhood, including an autobiographical letter by Margaret
Clifford, Lady Grace Mildmay’s autobiographical reflections, Lady Anne Clifford’s diary, and Rose Throckmorton’s Certain Old Stories. Along with descriptions of her own youth, Anne Clifford also provides several tantalising glimpses of her young daughter Margaret. Although genre helps account for the presence of young girls in life writing, the inclusion of information about these women’s childhoods should not be mistaken for an established generic convention. The tradition of biographies beginning ab ovo, as Tristram Shandy would say, had not been established. To include a description of children’s experiences was a conscious choice that implied childhood mattered in the formation of the adult. Today this might be an assumption, but in the seventeenth century it was not.

Rather than writing in a well-established genre, women would have been drawing from a variety of complementary traditions. Margaret Clifford (Anne’s mother) explicitly saw herself as blazing new ground when she wrote an autobiographical letter to her chaplain Dr Leyfield. She describes herself as adapting the masculine tradition of dividing men’s lives into seven ages and matches that up to ‘The Dance of the Pilgrimage of Grief’ so that the story of her life becomes a series of trials and tribulations. ‘Men commonly divide their life by sevens,’ she writes, ‘so mean I, to divide mine well known most of them to thee.’

She breaks off after five stages, since she sees herself as in the middle of that fifth stage, and her life story leads up to a plea to God that the rest of her life be free from the sorrow of the first five stages. James Daybell sees her letter as a ‘vehicle for self-analysis’, which it is, but it is also an attempt to construct the female life cycle as a series of progressive stages that Margaret hopes will finally culminate in happiness and salvation. Her method of organising those stages, however, does not follow the ‘maid, wife, widow’ schema that I discussed extensively in Chapter 1 but instead offers a more nuanced breakdown of the events that Margaret saw as shaping the course of her fate. Although she mentions her marriage and children, Margaret breaks down the stages of her life according to her emotional responses to difficult events with the central purpose of enabling her to shape the remaining part of her life. ‘Let me cry to God’, she writes, ‘for the mercy of his sons blood to spare me from farther plagues and turn me from my sins by the hands of mercy, that I may recover my strength before I go hence and show his judgment and mercy to the generation of my lady, for I fear to speak of my griefs that follow the fifth seventh.’

Given such a statement, one might expect that the story of her life detailed her various transgressions, but in Margaret’s account, her sins manifest themselves not by her actions but by the tribulations she
faces, such as her two sons’ deaths. She represents that misfortune as a continuation of her bad luck. When she comes to the fourth stage, she notes, ‘it seemed all would turn with a contrary note of joy. Time took and brought many things of trouble away . . . but straight I went aside with my old note of sorrow.’ That note of sorrow began in her infancy, what Margaret calls her ‘first seven’, explaining that she ‘came as unlooked for’, or early, and that because of her mother’s death, she and her siblings ‘were scattered and put to the disposal of friends’. Despite such a melancholy beginning, marked by several ‘strange’ and ‘divers’ kinds of sicknesses, Margaret indicates that the kindness of her caretakers from her early years has continued over the years and stands ‘as the chiefest of [her] happiness’. And according to Margaret, her later childhood only made her less comfortable in her surroundings. The remarriage of Margaret’s father and her re-entrance into his household signals the entrance into what she sees as the second stage of her life. In addition to the death of her beloved brother Edward, she notes that ‘according to the course of times there was changes of manner from my childs life’. Those changes seem particularly caught up with the treatment she received from her father’s new wife, whom she notes that she ‘fear’d’, and from her brother John Russell, who she notes ‘dealt more unkindly with my childish tender deeds, than I expected’. She provides no details, but interestingly does attribute falling ill with green sickness to his ‘unbrotherly dealing’.

It does seem true that the Russell family was not as warm and loving as Margaret would have liked, and her own marriage was turbulent. She and George Clifford separated in 1600 in part due to his economic extravagance as he became embroiled in court life (she writes in the letter that exchanging ‘his country pleasures’ for the ‘pleasant delights of court’ resulted in him wasting their ‘land and substance’). She does end the letter on a potentially hopeful note, recording the conception and birth of her daughter Anne and praising God, but within the text of the letter, she clearly focuses on the negative aspects of her life as part of her plea for future prosperity and grace.

How a text represented female childhood often depended upon why a text represented it, and class status deeply inflected Margaret Clifford’s letter as well as the autobiography of Grace Mildmay and the diary of Margaret’s daughter Anne Clifford. Unlike Margaret, Mildmay and Anne both describe their girlish selves as spectators. Mildmay’s autobiographical papers, extracts of which have been published in Linda Pollock’s With Faith and Physic, offer insights into ways that early modern culture imagined the transitional period between female infancy and adult womanhood. Admittedly, Mildmay’s life cannot
be taken as representative. Not only was she in many ways atypical of girls even in her own social class, she also frames her memories to suit her principles. Though she holds up her family as an instructional model, her childhood was decidedly class and gender specific. The focus of her education was on preparing her for the future role of elite wife, and her educational advice effectively excludes working- and middling-class children from the category of ‘children’. Nevertheless, Mildmay’s manuscript offers a retrospective portrait of one girl’s experience, and her narrative reveals just how much ideas about girlhood could influence the way early modern people perceived themselves and the world around them.

Mildmay’s love for her governess clearly demonstrates the close affective ties that could form between girls and their female caretakers. As the niece of Mildmay’s father, Mistress Hamblyn was raised by Mildmay’s mother Anne and later entrusted with the education of all three of the family’s daughters. According to Mildmay, Mistress Hamblyn ‘was of an excellent quick spirit and pleasantly conceited, so that she won my eldest sister and me to be in love with her and to delight in all her speeches and actions’. Mildmay’s language suggests an intense relationship between teacher and student, and her use of the word ‘love’ does indeed seem to be accurate. Mildmay writes:

I delighted so much in her company that I would sit with her all the day in her chamber and by my good will would never go from her, embracing always her rebukes and reproofs . . . And when I was not with her she would be sure to be with me, at my heels to see where and with whom I was and what I did or spake.

Although these claims seem somewhat hyperbolic (presumably they were occasionally separated), they reveal a strikingly human picture of a child seeking adult approval and attention. The girl who became Grace Mildmay was glad to be watched and monitored closely by her beloved governess, and she does not seem to have resented being taught to be submissive. Even when Mistress Hamblyn seeks to ward off idleness, Mildmay describes her lessons as welcome diversions rather than impositions:

And when she did see me idly disposed, she would set me to cipher with my pen and to cast up and prove great sums and accounts, and sometimes set me to write a supposed letter to this or that body concerning such and such things, and other times set me to read in Dr. Turner’s herbal and in Bartholomew Vigoe, and other times she set me to sing psalms and sometimes set me to some curious work (for she was an excellent workwoman in all kinds of needlework, and most curiously she would perform it).
We can see in her language some traces of childhood obstinacy. She may emphasise her obedience, but she also reveals that she did not always get her way. Since she could not always be with Mistress Hamblyn, there were clearly times when she experienced an absence of her ‘good will’.

Mildmay portrays Mistress Hamblyn as both the product of an ideal female education and its provider. Having been well brought up by Anne Mildmay, the governess had attained the tangible knowledge of keeping accounts and producing compositions as well as acquiring the intangible traits of ‘wisdom and gravity’. She could:

give a right answer and true judgment of most things and give wise counsel upon any occasion. And she could apprehend and contrive any matter whatsoever propounded unto her most judiciously and set her mind down in writing either by letters indited for otherwise as well as most men could have done. She had (also) good knowledge in physic and surgery . . . She scoffed at dalliance, idle talk and wanton behaviour, appertaining thereunto with a touch of a caveat to take heed therof.25

In imitation of her own childhood caretaker, Mistress Hamblyn seeks to instil in her pupils these same skills and moral dispositions, while her replication of her own gendered education uncovers the fraught position of the woman teacher. She can perform tasks as well as most men and assumes a great deal of power within the student-teacher relationship, and yet she reproduces the conservative values and gender relations that her own excellence challenges.

Mistress Hamblyn’s methods for inculcating conventional feminine behaviour simultaneously deny and authorise the female child’s agency. On the one hand, the fastidious governess counsels her young charges to think of themselves as always being observed, and even when alone, to behave ‘as if all the world did look upon’ them.26 Stressing the panoptical state of aristocratic society, where the mere appearance of misconduct could ruin a woman’s reputation, the governess instructs her cousin to shun the company of lewd and idle people and to behave in a manner appropriate for her gender and class status.

That said, the way Mildmay becomes conditioned to view herself as always being under surveillance is by surveying others. In her allusion to Mistress Hamblyn’s childhood, Mildmay praises her governess for subjecting all the people she meets to harsh scrutiny. Even from her youth, she has ‘made good use of all things that ever she did read, see or hear and observed all companies that ever she came in’.27 What interests me about this description is the extent to which it figures girlhood as a time of vigorous observation. Although intended to produce a submissive woman, the use of exemplarity as a teaching tool invites children to condemn adult conduct. Whereas we so often see adults looking at
female children in conduct manuals, in Mildmay’s autobiography we see female children encouraged to look at and judge adults. The governess actively calls her young pupil’s attention to the inhabitants of her father’s house, pointing out an ignorant man who ‘gloried in his own wit’ only to make a fool of himself at dinner and a woman with ‘a subtle spirit, full of words and questions . . . a busybody and a meddler in matters which concerned her not’.28 She also encourages Mildmay to observe the ‘monstrous spectacle’ of a couple whose licentious behaviour with other men and women undoes the sanctity of their marriage. One can easily imagine a young Mildmay sitting at her parents’ table, watching the adults, listening to their conversations and using Mistress Hamblyn’s titbits of gossip to decipher their behaviour.

For a text that places so much emphasis on controlling the books available to children, Mildmay’s writing seems deeply uninvested in keeping them ignorant of vice. Mildmay claims that her father discharged any servants who behaved in a ‘lewd and impudent’ manner that might corrupt his daughters ‘by evil examples’, and she reports seeing her father ‘scourge a young man naked from the girdle upwards, with fresh rods, for making but a show and countenance of a saucy and irreverent behaviour towards’ his children.29 But despite her father’s diligence, his household seems to have afforded a great deal of fodder for the disapprobation of Mistress Hamblyn. To teach Mildmay to abhor the behaviour of the licentious, unfaithful married couple, Mistress Hamblyn composes and performs ‘four or five verses’ mocking them and ‘wittily’ condemning their debauchery.30 While the exercise clearly had a pedagogical aim, it verges on entertainment and seems a rather cheeky employment for a young girl. It cleverly transforms moral instruction into a childhood amusement.

Mildmay’s childhood experiences illustrate the practical application of her educational theories and moral values. She recommends that children should read what she read as a child, and her memories provide supporting evidence for her general recommendations. She offers her own childhood as a kind of model upbringing. Using her parents and governess as examples, Mildmay holds up their attitudes and methods as guidelines for her daughter and grandchildren. Her goal is to provide prescriptive advice, and her childhood has to be viewed in light of her larger project of moral instruction. She represents herself as a child in order to help fashion other children in her image.

Although Mildmay provides a substantial account of her own childhood, she never writes about how she raised her own daughter. This fact may seem surprising given that she imagines her immediate audience as her daughter and her daughter’s children. Yet her daughter’s childhood
remains completely absent. Linda Pollock has remarked on the oddity of this omission, suggesting that perhaps it can be explained by the fact that her daughter was an adult at the time the autobiography was written. Another possible explanation might be that setting oneself up as a paradigmatic student would feel different from setting oneself up as an ideal mother; the former allows Mildmay to credit her governess and parents for her achievements, whereas the latter might seem too much like self-praise. It is also unclear what purpose the description of her daughter’s childhood would have played within the instructional framework of the memoirs. Having already described her own youth, perhaps describing her daughter’s would have felt repetitive.

A woman who does talk about her daughter’s girlhood is Anne Clifford. Like Grace Mildmay, Anne provides a memorial reconstruction of her own youth, but she does so as a prequel to a diary recounting her adult life. The first section recalls her life at court during the transitional period from Elizabeth’s death to James’s accession in 1603. The manuscript then jumps to the year 1616 as part of a more regular diary that offers a month-by-month account of her life between 1616 and 1619. It is in this second part that Anne introduces her two-year-old daughter Margaret, or ‘the Child’, into the equation. The now twenty-six-year-old Anne begins using the text as a kind of datebook, keeping track of legal business as well as noting everyday details. In the first part, political events like James’s coronation commingle with familial details about disputes between her parents and notes about her becoming sick from eating too many pear pies. When she starts keeping track of her adult life, she likewise alternates between mentioning her legal affairs and describing her daughter’s latest fit of the ague. Mary Ellen Lamb has read this as part and parcel of Anne’s establishment of her distinctly female voice, while Mihoko Suzuki has read the technique as part of Anne’s construction of herself as central to her family’s history. In terms of her representation of childhood, by bringing together the teenage girlhood of the mother with the much younger girlhood of her small child, Anne Clifford’s diary beautifully illustrates the social and physical differences between aristocratic female children at different life stages.

Whereas Mildmay describes her upbringing as a prototype for the best way to raise children, Anne Clifford records her youthful memories and her daughter’s childhood developments as part of a larger project
of laying claim to her father’s lands. The diary includes personal moments, but it does so in the service to Anne’s dynastic ambitions. Technically, her father’s vast northern estates in Westmoreland and Yorkshire had been entailed upon his daughter by a writ that stipulated they should be passed down to direct descendants regardless of sex. When her father died in 1605, however, he left the estate to his brother, Sir Francis Clifford, instead of to his fifteen-year-old daughter. With her mother’s support, Lady Anne Clifford began a legal battle that would stretch on for nearly forty years. She eventually inherited the lands in 1643 when the death of her cousin Henry left her as the only remaining potential heir. In the meantime, she began documenting herself and her family’s history as part of what she would come to call her ‘Great Books’, a genealogical collection of facts, dates and recollections of the Clifford family’s past and present. Anne writes documents meant for her own use while living as well as for leaving behind her after death.

Beginning with the funeral of Queen Elizabeth in 1603, the diary’s description of the youthful Anne does not prefigure the woman she became, but the woman she should have become. Had her prospects panned out, she would have had a very different life. ‘If Queen Elizabeth had lived,’ Anne writes, ‘she intended to prefer me to be of the Privy Chamber for at that time there was as much hope and expectations of me as of any other young lady whatsoever’ (p. 42). The period of girlhood described in the diary consequently becomes a space of nostalgia. The acrimony between her parents notwithstanding, Anne recreates her thirteenth year as a happy and eventful one: a time of potential, before her father’s death would plunge her into a thirty-eight-year legal battle to gain control of his lands.

As in Mildmay’s autobiography, Anne figures girlhood as a time of intense observation. Hovering on the fringes of adult society, the young Anne watches the actions of the court with all the assiduousness of a young Mistress Hamblyn. But unlike Mildmay’s governess, Anne studies adult behaviour for social rather than moral edification. Whereas Mistress Hamblyn teaches Mildmay to set herself apart and judge the people she surveys, Anne longs to join their community. Instead of seeking to evaluate, the girlish Anne searches for a way to insert herself into the historical events taking place around her. She expresses disappointment that her youth prevented her from playing a larger role in Queen Elizabeth’s funeral, and reports having regretted being unable to join her mother and aunt in the procession of the queen’s corpse toward Westminster. She was excluded, she says, ‘by reason I was held too young’ (p. 45). Prevented from participating in the ceremony, she had to content herself with being an eyewitness: ‘I stood in the church
at Westminster to see the solemnity performed’ (p. 45). Anne as a child longs to play a more active role in the spectacle of adult life and eagerly anticipates the day when she will go from watching to being watched. In the meantime, she takes great pleasure in her participation as spectator, delighting in a trip to Windsor where she stands with the Princess Elizabeth in the shrine of the Great Hall ‘to see the King and all the knights set at dinner’ (p. 53).

Despite her sense of exclusion, Anne was remarkably integrated into courtly society. She attended Queen Elizabeth’s funeral, she accompanied her mother and aunt on the new royal court’s progress, and she helped to entertain the new Queen Anne when she stopped at Sir Henry Wallop’s. Her inclusion in these activities as onlooker and occasional participant was part of her education. Anne’s mother and aunt take care to introduce her to the ways of the court. They see to it that she learns who is who, with whom they are allies, and with whom they are rivals.

The focus of her courtly education is on the acquisition of social and political knowledge and, unlike Mildmay’s autobiography, her diary remains strikingly free from any emphasis on being taught to be feminine or submissive. At no point does Anne recall being advised to be chaste, silent and obedient. Her mother does at one point punish her for riding ahead with a Mr Mene, but Anne does not reveal the reason her mother was angry, perhaps because she never evaluates her childhood behaviour in a moral context. The event becomes instead an opportunity to explain the formation of a deep friendship between Anne and her cousin Frances. For the young Anne, being alone and without company was a source of great anguish (reminiscent of Mildmay’s desire always to be with her governess), and sleeping alone was a punishment. It was just such a punishment that her mother chose in this instance, and as Anne tells the story:

A little afore this time my mother and my aunt of Bath and my cousin Frances went to North Hall, my Mother being extreme angry with me for riding before with Mr. Menerell, where my mother in her anger commanded that I should lie in a chamber alone, which I could not endure, but my cousin Frances got the key of my chamber and lay with me which was the first time I loved her so very well. (p. 7)

A moralistic agenda like Mildmay’s might use this anecdote to illustrate the danger that riding ahead with a man would pose to a young girl’s reputation, or condemn the girls for not accepting a deserved rebuke. Anne shows no remorse. Her diary celebrates the act of minor disobedience for its initiation of an emotionally valuable relationship between two women.
Indeed, the only aspect of Anne’s childhood that makes it feel like a specifically female childhood is her firm location in a community of women. In addition to portraying girlhood as a time ripe with social potential, Anne’s diary represents it as a time of close female friendships. She spends a great deal of time with her mother at the houses of her female relations, and she imitates the adult women’s cultural practice of forging affective alliances. Sharing a bed with Frances and Mary Carey leads to a close friendship between Anne and the two other girls, all of them united by their positions on the cusp of adulthood. Together, they walk about the house and garden at Hampton Court, an activity that opens up space for them to play at participating more directly in court culture.

Given Anne’s investment in tracing her own history back to the time of her youth, and her investment in providing a family history more generally, it is not surprising that when she turns to documenting the present, she also records the history of her daughter’s physical and social development. Anne interests herself in the everyday material life of her daughter, from wearing new clothes to learning to walk. When Margaret cuts two new teeth in March 1617, giving her a total of eighteen, her mother duly notes it in her diary, and she does the same a few years later when the girl wears her first velvet coat on New Year’s Day 1619 (p. 123, p. 155). The bulk of the references record childhood milestones like these; Margaret’s girlhood appears in the diary as a series of ‘firsts’, from her first haircut to her first time sharing a bed with her parents.

Margaret’s episodic appearances in the diary stem from the conditions of aristocratic childrearing. Like all children of the landed classes, Margaret had her own attendants and was not under the direct care of her mother. Her first appearance in the diary on 19 April 1616 is part of an entry in which Anne notes, ‘This morning the Bishop of St. David’s and my little Child were brought to speak to me’ (p. 77). The phrasing of this statement makes no distinction between the visit of an adult guest and the visit of a daughter who lives in the house. A child like her daughter Margaret appears at this moment to be undifferentiated from adults in that she visits her mother just as any other person would. She has not been fully integrated into her parents’ household, and a social and physical distance separates the mother and daughter. On 8 May 1617, for example, Anne writes that she spent the day doing needlework, ‘the time being very tedious unto me as having neither comfort nor company only the Child’ (p. 133). Differentiating between ‘the Child’ and ‘company’, Anne defines her daughter as outside of social existence. Anne’s habit of referring to little Margaret as ‘the Child’ throughout the diary further
suggests that she does not yet see her daughter as an individual or a person in her own right.

Not surprisingly, the child’s perspective remains absent from the diary. Margaret’s activities appear as events in her mother’s life, rather than her own. Anne remembers, for example, that her husband went to London on 23 January 1613, which was ‘the same day the Child put on her red baize coat’ (p. 117). Margaret’s scattered ‘firsts’ serve as memorial markers of other incidents. By intermingling references to Margaret’s new clothes with details about the king’s opposition to Anne’s legal claims and notes about lending money to her sister, Anne provides herself with another way to keep track of what she has done and when. Along with knowing the date on which events occur, Anne also has enough personal details to remember the day in question. Jotting down when she gave Margaret’s old clothes to her steward doubles as a record of what became of the garments and a way to remind herself that it was on the same day that she signed a bill to give Mr Askew seven pounds upon his return from Jerusalem (p. 119). This is not to say that Anne did not love her daughter. The diary certainly invests Margaret with an emotional presence, and it portrays Anne as preoccupied with her daughter’s health. When the child suffered from the ague during the winter of 1616–17, her mother carefully records the frequency of her fits and the lengths of their duration, and she writes about personally attending to her daughter during them. She spent most of the day on 25 January ‘going up and down to see the Child’ during a fit that lasted six or seven hours (p. 117). Throughout the diary, Anne manifests an interest in her daughter’s material life, what she wore and how she felt and whether they could be together, but her investment in her daughter’s individual development does not prevent her from acknowledging the social dimensions of early modern parenting.

Children in the diary are first and foremost conduits for relationships between adults. Christenings are important in the lives of parents and godparents rather than the lives of infants. For Anne, the baptism of Sir Henry Vane’s son offers an opportunity to further connections with a powerful family rather than an opportunity for the infant to undergo a spiritual initiation into the church; Vane named Lady Anne Clifford along with Lady Selby as the godmothers, and the names of these influential adults take precedence over the newborn. Likewise, when Anne goes to see Lady Somerset’s child, she does so to please the proud mother and not for the child’s sake. Even the incorporation of children into the economy of courtly gift-giving extended parental alliances. A courtesy to a child doubled as a courtesy to the parent. When Anne sends a servant with ‘a little jewel of opal to Lady Trenchard’s girl’ in
March 1617, she aims to please Lady Trenchard as much as the child (p. 123). Anne’s daughter Margaret becomes the recipient of just such a gift on 4 February 1617, when Thomas Woodgate, who was in service to Richard Sackville, arrived from London and ‘brought a squirrel to the Child’ (p. 117). Woodgate’s present thoughtfully provides the child with an amusement to help her through a time of sickness. It also elicits the gratitude of her mother, his master’s wife.

The use of children to solidify adult friendships depended in some part upon the assumption that parents were invested in their children and loved them well enough to care about kindnesses to them. Caring about the daily human needs of children and seeing them as tools for negotiating relationships between adults were not necessarily mutually exclusive. Anne’s affection for her daughter appears most strongly in the diary when her husband takes the child away from her. For all that the diary portrays her father Richard Sackville as fond of Margaret, it also reveals that he was not above using her as leverage in his legal negotiations with his wife. Sackville lived extravagantly and had sold a great deal of his lands to raise money to pay for clothing and gaming. He hoped to curry favour with the king and to receive ready money to support his profligate lifestyle in exchange for convincing his wife to drop her legal suit against her cousin. When Anne refused, her husband exercised his patriarchal rights and took away his wife’s access to their daughter. On 3 May 1616, Sackville sent a letter insisting that Margaret be sent to him in London, a command that Anne describes as ‘somewhat grievous’ to her. She thought about refusing, but she writes, ‘but when I considered that it would both make my Lord more angry with me and be worse for the Child, I resolved to let her go’ (p. 79). She was to let the child go for some time afterwards, as she reports. Margaret left for London the next day, and five days later, on what Anne describes as ‘a very grievous and sorrowful day’, her husband sent word that his daughter was going to live at Horsely and would no longer be allowed to go to their house in Dorset (p. 20). Although Sackville’s tactical move did not succeed in the long run, in the short run Anne seems to have made some compromises and promised to listen more to the arguments against pursuing her inheritance; on 19 June, Anne remarks that her lord had persuaded her to consent ‘to his business’ and assured her ‘how good and kind a husband he would be’ (p. 91). In exchange for her cooperation, he ‘gave his faithful promise’ to come after her to the north as soon as he could and ‘the Child should come out of hand’ so that she and her husband ‘were never greater friends than at this time’ (p. 93). Sackville made good on his promise, but Anne changed her mind about the business afterwards, noting in January 1617 that the queen had
advised her against trusting the king. When she met with the king on the twentieth, she refused to give up Westmoreland, leaving James ‘in a great chaff’ (p. 113).

As Anne’s experiences with her husband reveal, children could be loved individually and still used to create political and familial alliances. For Margaret, her role as a conduit for adult relationships eventually enables her to enter into the same world as her parents. From being a pawn in the negotiations between her parents, Margaret gradually begins to emerge in the diary as a larger player in the adult world as her parents introduce her to their aristocratic allies. The Sackvilles began the process of integrating Margaret more fully into their social lives by taking her to Northampton House on 23 December 1616. Anne, Richard and Margaret all went together to keep company with the group gathered around the Lord Treasurer, Thomas Howard, Earl of Suffolk. On this occasion, Anne records that the Lord Treasurer and ‘all the company commended her [the child] and she went down into my Lady Walden’s chamber where my cousin Anne saw her and kissed her but I stayed with my Lady Suffolk’ (pp. 103–5). We can imagine that this is the kind of attention that Anne herself would pay to Lady Somerset’s ‘little child’ when she visited her in the Tower in April 1619. Aristocratic visiting practices incorporated children as a way of sharing the interests of fellow parents. Margaret, in her mother’s absence, has been petted and made much of by adults outside her family circle, and what we have in the diary is an adult’s report of what the child must have told her. We have a second-hand glimpse here of Margaret’s perspective and how much she enjoyed the kind treatment of the Lord Treasurer. As the thirteen-year-old Anne delighted in playing a part in the entertainments taking place around her, so too the very young Margaret seems to have found her brief sojourn on the adult stage exciting.

Anne does for her daughter what her mother and aunt did for her. She introduces Margaret at a young age to influential members of the court, and she brings the girl with her as the Sackvilles travel from household to household. Just as Anne’s own girlhood remains strikingly free from concerns about inculcating feminine behaviour, her representation of her daughter’s childhood places very little emphasis on the child’s specifically female status. Although the diary employs the gendered pronoun ‘she’ to mark Margaret’s biological sex, Anne always refers to her simply as ‘the Child’. For all the mother’s precision in documenting her daughter’s illness, she expresses no concern about identifying her as a girl and reveals no anxiety about teaching her to be chaste and obedient. Margaret’s name does not even appear in the diary until almost the end of the manuscript.
The only hint of the daughter’s initiation into a culture of femininity occurs in April 1617, when Anne identifies the twenty-eighth as the ‘first time that the Child put on a pair of whalebone bodice’ (p. 133). As Margaret grows up, Lady Anne slowly initiates her daughter into the fashionable dress of adult women, from the addition of laces to the wearing of velvet coats. Putting on a whalebone bodice brings Margaret’s experience of clothing closer to that of an adult. Wearing this article of restrictive dress is part of the socialisation process, a feminine alternative to breeching, albeit one that remains far less publicly marked. The bodice proved to be a precursor of another crucial transition. Not long afterwards, Anne had her daughter leave off one of the signature aspects of children’s dress: leading strings. Learning to walk required a change in costume. Anne writes, ‘Upon the 1st I cut the Child’s strings off from her coats and made her use to go about so as she had two or three falls at first but no hurt with them’ (p. 133). Margaret here undergoes a significant step in the process of growing up in early modern England. Leading strings were attached to the back of a child’s pinafore and used to help the child walk upright. The cutting of the strings signals Margaret’s need to learn to walk by herself. The child thus begins an important transition from the costume of childhood to the costume of adulthood.

As Margaret grows older, she emerges as a slightly more distinct character as her parents begin to regard her as more of an individual and less of a generic child. On her fifth birthday, during which Sackville caused her health to be drunk throughout the house, her mother calls her daughter by the name Lady Margaret more often than ‘the Child’.38 She also adds a note worrying about Margaret’s linguistic development. Anne worries that strangers have a hard time understanding Margaret when she speaks, owing to a constant cold that winter, and while from a modern perspective Margaret’s speech would seem to proceed from normal childhood difficulties of pronunciation and elocution, for Anne this was a real concern. The child who had appeared almost exclusively as a series of new outfits and fits of illness was starting to have specific traits. Accordingly, her parents commissioned their daughter’s portrait, an indication of her increasing importance and individualisation. She was now on her way to being more closely integrated into courtly society and becoming the kind of active spectator that her mother was at thirteen.

Rather than being caught in a panoptical vision, Anne Clifford and her daughter Margaret seem to be in the audience with the world performing for them. The aristocratic adults in their lives seem to ignore these two children benevolently when necessary, allowing them to grow
up outside the kind of Foucauldian gaze in which Mistress Hamblyn is so invested. Both Mildmay and Anne construct girlhood as a class-specific experience during which female children acquire the knowledge necessary to function in the world of the aristocracy, and this acquisition seems to require a certain amount of invisibility at particular moments. Even as female children become visible in aristocratic adult narratives and long for integration into the social world, their maturation depends upon watching.

III

As with aristocratic female children, the individual voices of girls from the labouring and merchant classes can be difficult to access because they only appear in a cursory way in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts. However, at least one autobiographical account has survived that in its transmission has preserved the residue of a merchant-class girl’s writing presence. Inspired by her father’s appearance in Holinshed’s Chronicles, Rose Hickman Throckmorton decided to set down an account of her life for her children. With her own hand at the age of eighty-five, she wrote a brief autobiography, three seventeenth-century copies of which are extant in the British Library. The earliest of the manuscripts, entitled Certaine old stories recorded by an aged gentlewoman a littel before her death to be p[er]used by her children and posterity, is now bound with a partial copy made by Throckmorton’s great-great-granddaughter Elisabeth Hickman as a childhood writing exercise in 1667. These manuscripts link together two early modern women of different generations through a relation of family history that takes the great-great-grandmother’s girlhood as its starting point and ends with the girlhood of her great-great-granddaughter. Although direct access to Elisabeth Hickman’s voice remains elusive, her girlhood activities have left behind a material trace.

What Throckmorton’s writing shares with Mildmay’s and Anne Clifford’s is the prominent place she accords English national history in her narrative of girlhood (and of her life more generally). In her recommended reading plan for fashioning children into Protestant adults, Mildmay makes knowledge of history a crucial component of children’s education. Along with the Bible, John Foxe’s Acts and Monuments, statutes and law, and philosophy, Mildmay prescribes reading in the English chronicles. Her dictum that children of both sexes should read history is particularly provocative because in other contexts reading history was constructed as a masculine pursuit. Charles Herle, as quoted by William
London in 1658, described the study of history as a way to train ‘minds to manlike actions’ on the way to being weaned from ‘childish effeminacy’. However, if reading history was a gendered activity, it was one in which educated women definitely participated, as we can see clearly in Anne Clifford’s diary and Throckmorton’s reminiscences. Anne frequently mentions reading in ‘the Chronicles’, and Throckmorton begins her own narrative by quoting them. Anne Clifford and Rose Throckmorton share a common goal of reading, writing and participating in history, and both set up political, religious and social events as important influences on their experiences of growing up female.

As a Protestant woman of the merchant class who lived through the reigns of five monarchs – Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary Tudor, Elizabeth I and James I – Throckmorton’s manuscript provides an invaluable lens into the lives of Protestant merchants during the turbulent period of the English Reformation. Rose Throckmorton was the daughter of William Lock, a London mercer who was later in the service of Henry VIII. Lock secured his place in English history when he agreed to travel to Dunkirk to remove Pope Clement VII’s proclamation of Henry’s excommunication. His actions secured him a brief mention in Holinshed’s chronicles, the citation with which Throckmorton begins her narrative. She uses his entry into the history books as her entry into writing, amplifying the account by recording her personal memories.

Paired with her great-great-granddaughter’s copy, Throckmorton’s manuscript is a material testament to the way that unpublished women’s writing could provide a literary legacy for other women. Elisabeth Hickman signed and dated her copy of her great-great-grandmother’s autobiography on several pages, and the rules on the page are still visible. The handwriting is clearly that of a novice, and the text is unfinished. Hickman stops copying at the point in the original text where Throckmorton’s first husband and brother were imprisoned by Mary Tudor. The goal of the task seems to have been for the young Elisabeth to practise her handwriting, and it is the kind of exercise that Mildmay reports being assigned by Mistress Hamblyn to prevent her from being idle. The young Elisabeth may have moved on to another exercise or become tired. One more page has been copied out in an adult’s handwriting with different ink, but the hand remains unidentified. Although relatively ephemeral, the surviving notebook with its multiple signatures suggests that Elisabeth was claiming ownership over the physical page even if the substance belonged to her great-great-grandmother, an action that allowed her, even as a child, to write herself into her family’s history.

All of the examples of life writing in this chapter share a conviction that political and social events play significant roles in girls’ lives; they
also share a conviction that girls play significant roles in political and social events. The girlish selves of these women writers observed the world around them and found a way to respond to their culture, and the culture could not help but respond in turn. These women wrote and were written about, however, not as girls *per se*, but as ex-girls. For these women, their past childhood selves become like Holinshed’s *Chronicles* or Foxe’s *Booke of Martyrs*, texts from the past to be reshaped into their present narratives.

I began by saying that we do not have unfettered access to early modern girls’ and women’s lives, and it was undoubtedly clear that I said that with a sense of loss. For all that it has been pleasurable to find presence where I had initially seen an absence, it can be disappointing to recognise that these narratives are opaque and non-transcendent. I find comfort in realising that if we can’t speak in an unmediated way with the dead, neither can we speak in an unmediated way with the living. If, as Judith Butler argues, ‘The “I” has no story of its own that is not also the story of a relation – or a set of relations – to a set of norms’, that is as true for my own account of myself as for early modern girls and women.

Notes


5. Rachel Fane, Notebooks, Centre for Kentish Studies, MS U269 F38/1–4.

11. My approach diverges from Sharon Cadman Seelig in that I am not so much concerned with ‘the autobiographical impulse’ as with the way narratives about early modern girlhoods tend to be structured not as self-writing but as writing about a self that is no longer or never was the self. See Sharon Cadman Seelig, *Autobiography and Gender in Early Modern Literature: Reading Women’s Lives, 1600–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 1.
17. Ibid. p. 285.
18. Margaret Clifford’s biographical information is primarily available from sources about her husband, like Williamson’s book, or work on her more famous daughter. For details on her relationship with Anne, see Richard T. Spence, *Lady Anne Clifford* (Stroud: Sutton, 1997), as well as Williamson’s biography.
21. Grace Mildmay, née Sharington, and her husband Anthony Mildmay were married at an unusually young age. Mildmay was fifteen, and her husband Anthony was twenty, and according to Mildmay’s account, his father pressured him into the match. Mildmay makes no mention of what her feelings about the marriage were, but she indicates that Anthony was far more interested in travelling and adventure than in settling down to domestic arrangements. In fact, their marriage was even more unusual in that the couple spent much of their first twenty years apart, with Anthony
travelling on the Continent. They did eventually have one child, a daughter born a good fifteen years after they were wedded. Also strange about the match was that no financial arrangements were officially settled, a fact that would produce problems for the Mildmays later when it came to both Lady Mildmay’s and her husband’s inheritances. For details, see Pollock, ‘Family Affairs’, in With Faith and Physic, pp. 4–22.

27. Ibid. pp. 25–6.
30. Ibid. p. 27.
31. As Pollock points out, ‘it cannot be argued that Lady Mildmay was uninterested in children’ because she states elsewhere that she had been disappointed when she remained childless during her first fifteen years of marriage. See Pollock, With Faith and Physic, p. 11.
32. For an explanation of the various manuscripts of Anne Clifford’s diary and its relationship to her other forms of life writing, including her Great Books, see Paul Salzman, Reading Early Modern Women’s Writing (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 95–101.
35. For a detailed account of the entailment, see Williamson, Lady Anne Clifford, pp. 489–507.
36. For an astute analysis of her Great Books as well as the history of Anne Clifford’s scholarly reception, see Salzman, Reading Early Modern Women’s Writing, pp. 90–108.
37. All quotations from Anne Clifford’s diary come from The Memoir of 1603 and Diary of 1616–19, ed. Katherine Acheson (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2007).
38. See Acheson, p. 77, n. 38.
39. For an extended account of the differences between the three and an analysis of Throckmorton’s construction of Protestant history, see my article ‘The Exile of Rose Hickman Throckmorton’, Reformation 15 (2010), pp. 99–114. The manuscripts are British Library Additional MS 43827 A, British Library Additional MS 43827 B, and British Library Additional MS 45027. My references are to the manuscripts, but Maria Dowling and Joy Shakespeare offer an accurate transcription to BL Add MS 43827 A in ‘Religion and Politics in Mid-Tudor England through the Eyes of an English
