The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Sisters

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Published by Edinburgh University Press


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Epilogue: Mass-Produced Languages and the End of Touristic Choices

‘Dreamwood’
In the old, scratched, cheap wood of the typing stand
there is a landscape, veined, which only a child can see
or the child’s older self,
a woman dreaming when she should be typing
the last report of the day. If this were a map,
she thinks, a map laid down to memorize
because she might be walking it, it shows
ridge upon ridge fading into hazed desert,
here and there a sign of aquifers
and one possible watering-hole. If this were a map
it would be the map of the last age of her life,
not a map of choices but a map of variations
on the one great choice. It would be the map by which
she could see the end of touristic choices,
of distances blued and purpled by romance,
by which she would recognize that poetry
isn’t revolution but a way of knowing
why it must come. If this cheap, massproduced
wooden stand from the Brooklyn Union Gas Co.,
massproduced yet durable, being here now,
is what it is yet a dream-map
so obdurate, so plain,
she thinks, the material and the dream can join
and that is the poem and that is the late report.


I would like to think that words like ‘man’ and ‘woman’, ‘girl’ and ‘boy’,
‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ are like Adrienne Rich’s mass-produced
typing stand, products of a communal linguistic project beyond our
control, marked with the traces of a history at once personal and imper-
sonal, cheap and yet durable. We use these words because otherwise
we wouldn’t have anything else on which to set our typewriters, and in
using them we scratch them and leave behind our own traces, our own
speech acts, our own potential to be cited as an example of how the use of a word in language transforms its meaning.

I am completing this book at a moment when it feels imperative to assert the worth of scholarship that puts girls and women, not just gender or kinship formations, at the centre of its investigational questions. I feel that girls offer a way to keep women at the forefront of our discussions even as we remain cognisant that there is nothing essential about either ‘girls’ or ‘women’. Early modern speakers and writers felt the need for a more multivalent vocabulary with which to negotiate these issues, and we as twenty-first-century feminist literary critics need access to a vocabulary that is at least as rich as theirs was.