

# Introduction: Girls and Girlhood in Adaptations of Shakespeare

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## Abstract

In a short introductory essay, Deanne Williams discusses the emerging field of Girls Studies and the recent publication of books on girls in Shakespeare and the Renaissance. She argues that the process of Shakespeare adaptation often includes and incorporates girlhood, and proposes that girlhood and adaptation share much in common through a traditional perception that dismisses them as secondary and derivative. She also guides readers through this special issue on *Girls and Girlhood in Adaptations of Shakespeare*, highlighting how each contribution represents girlhood.

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## Girls and Girlhood Study Today

On October 11, 2012, the United Nations celebrated the first "Day of the Girl Child," calling attention to the treatment of girls and young women as the key moral issue of our time. With slogans such as "If you educate a girl, you educate a family" and "It only takes one girl to save the world," various NGO (Non Government Organizations) and corporate initiatives such as the Because I am a Girl Project and the Nike Foundation Girl Effect have communicated the vital importance of medical, educational, and social advancement for girls. At the same time, however, the 2012 shooting of schoolgirl Malala Yousafzai by Taliban gunmen, which came just two days before the first International Day of the Girl Child, and more recently, the kidnapping of some 200 Nigerian schoolgirls by the extremist group Boko Haram, illustrate the ongoing pressure, scrutiny, and life-threatening danger faced by girls who are exercising their right to an education and seeking to improve their lives. These events have galvanized the international community, showing, in the case of Malala, who was named one of *Time* magazine's Most Influential People in the World and who was a co-recipient of the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize, how powerfully a girl can draw world attention as a source of inspiration and a catalyst for social change. At the same time, however, the

continuing disappearance of the Nigerian schoolgirls confirms the urgent need for a transformative political advocacy that makes girls a priority.

Current public attention to the advancement of girls seeks to reverse centuries of discrimination and marginalization. Traditionally excluded from formal education and lines of inheritance, girls have been under-represented politically, socially, and historically, reinforcing stereotypes about feminine silence and submission and ongoing assumptions about their insignificance and marginality. The advent of Girlhood (or Girls) Studies in the 1990s, however, has drawn attention to girls and girlhood as a significant category in a wide range of fields, including sociology and anthropology, history, psychology, and literary and cultural studies. As the field of Girls Studies has emerged, along with a new journal, *Girlhood Studies*, founded in 2008, important work on contemporary girl cultures, theories of girlhood, girls and education, girls' psychology and subjectivities, and global girlhoods has emphasized not one universal notion of girlhood, but instead the wide range of contexts and experiences that produce contemporary as well as historical girls and girlhoods. As Marnina Gonick writes, "Girlhood, far from signifying a universal, biological grounded condition of female experience, emerges instead within particular sociohistorical, material, and discursive contexts" (Gonick 2003, 6). Moreover, as Catherine Driscoll points out, girls are not simply made, they are also active agents in their own self-expression: as girlhood is "shaped by multiple and shifting kinds of power" it is also produced and represented by "an equally diverse array of girlhood experiences within which girls themselves ha[ve] significant power" (Driscoll 2002, 13).

Until recently, however, there has been little work on early modern girlhood, as the vast majority of scholarship in Girls Studies focuses on contemporary girlhood, while historical discussions usually look to the Victorian period for the beginnings of girl culture. Kim M. Phillips's important historical study, *Medieval Maidens: Young Women and Gender in England 1250-1540* (2003), is the first book-length account of medieval English girlhood, extending into the Tudor period, and containing a significant discussion of girls' cultural experiences as readers and as musical and dramatic performers. Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford's landmark study, *Women in Early Modern England 1550-1720* (1998), while not wholly dedicated to girls, contains much important evidence of girls' experiences, and of how they were raised, perceived, and most importantly, valued in early modern England. Two new books, Jennifer Higginbotham's *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Sisters* (2013) and my own *Shakespeare and the Performance of Girlhood* (2014) explore early modern literary and cultural constructions of girlhood, the former illuminating the different meanings attached to the term "girl" in the period, and the latter revealing the key role played by Shakespeare and his contemporaries in the history of girlhood

and our ongoing notions of what it is to be a girl. The nine essays in this special issue of *Borrowers and Lenders* on "Girls and Girlhood in Adaptations of Shakespeare" together extend the developing scholarly conversation on early modern girls and girlhood into the area of adaptations of Shakespeare, bringing together early modern and contemporary girlhood studies, and revealing the expression and constitution of girlhood through a variety of different forms of engagement with Shakespeare and with the past.

### Girls in Shakespeare

The "girl" is a troubled category that evokes a complex and paradoxical range of associations, from innocence to sexuality, and from passivity to resistance. According to most philologists, the term "girl" in English comes from the Old English term "gyrela," for garment or skirt. The *Middle English Dictionary* defines "girle" as "a child of either sex," and the term included boys, as in Langland's *Piers Plowman*, which speaks of a "gramer for gurles," referring to schoolchildren. By the sixteenth century, the equivalents for "girle" supplied in dictionaries such as Palsgrave's *Lesclarcissement de la langue francoyse* (1530), John Rider's *Bibliotheca Scholastica* (1589) and John Florio's *A World of Words* (1598), clearly use it as a term for young females: "wenche," "damsel," "maide." Some of them carry connotations of sexual knowing: as in "like a girl: wanton," in Thomas Cooper's 1584 *Thesaurae Linguae Romanae et Britannicae*. Others associate it with innocence and modesty, as in Palgrave's "It is good to . . . acustome a gyrl to be shame faste." And others with service, as in Rider's "A girle that attendeth vpon hir mistres, especiallie in hir chamber."<sup>1</sup> These definitions are consistent with the conflicting messages girls today continue to receive, despite the discourse of Girl Power, about their sexuality, their external appearance and behavior, and expectations of deference and subordination to adults and males.

In Shakespeare's time, then, the term "girl" was becoming fixed as a term for "female child, or young woman," to use Samuel Johnson's definition, even as it retained its associations with sexuality and service and its history with boyhood. Although Shakespeare's stage did not admit young women as actresses, Shakespeare's boy actors impersonated a dynamic set of girl characters, including the thirteen year-old Juliet, fourteen year-old Marina, fifteen year-old Miranda, and sixteen year-old Perdita, and other characters, girls such as the wily Bianca, the tragic Lavinia, the canny Anne Page, and the iconic Ophelia, whose ages are not specified, although all of them are called "girl," usually by their fathers. Over the course of his career, Shakespeare's attention to girls and girlhood is, arguably, one of his ongoing preoccupations: the term "girl" appears sixty-eight times throughout his work. "Girl" can be used to label independent or recalcitrant behavior (as in Capulet's description of Juliet as a "wayward girl"), to highlight tragedy or victimhood (as in

Lavinia's epithet, "sweet girl"), as well as innocence (as Leontes recalls "in those unfledged days was my wife a girl"). Shakespeare's ideas about girlhood, then, are neither confined to stereotypes of demure submissiveness nor limited to promiscuous service; rather, Shakespeare's girls claim their right to self-determination in the face of parental opposition, vigorously defend themselves and their families, and express their feelings and their fears with wit and verve. As Caroline Bicks points out in her contribution to this volume, "girl" is often used to signify the space between puberty and marriage, and it is this particular time "that enables unique acts of female creativity," as girls act to escape or challenge the roles that are assigned to them and can imagine and perform a variety of other options.

Shakespeare's vivid characterizations of girlhood thus inspire some of the most famous adaptations and appropriations of his work. Mary Cowden Clarke's *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* (1851), a set of fictional prequels that conjure the girlhoods of Shakespearean characters for the girl reader, with the idea of contributing to the status of Shakespeare as a "helping friend," offering "vital precepts and models" of femininity "to the young girl." Cowden Clarke traced her interest to another adaptation, Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807), which offered versions of Shakespeare's plays specifically "for young ladies," explaining that girls had more restricted access to their fathers' libraries than boys, and enjoining boys to explain the difficult parts to their sisters. Their versions of Shakespeare were tailored, therefore, to their ideas about the sensibilities and limitations of the girl reader. For Cowden Clarke, by contrast, her imaginative attentiveness to the prehistories of Shakespearean girl characters reflect her own ideas about the interest and importance of girls' lives and experiences.

Long before Cowden Clarke and the Lambs, however, some of the very earliest adaptations of Shakespeare focus on girls and girlhood. *The Tempest, or the Enchanted Island* (1670), an adaptation of *The Tempest* by William Davenant and John Dryden, takes a play with only one girl character, Miranda, and gives her a sister, Dorinda; Ariel, the spirit who takes on many female parts in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, was played by a girl actress, and he is given a girlfriend, Milcha. Dorinda's boyfriend, Hippolito, was also a trouser role. As a kind of tacit celebration of the arrival of the actress on the public stage, the play is suddenly filled with girls. The process of adapting Shakespeare often has girlhood at its very heart: a Restoration adaptation of Shakespeare's *Pericles*, George Lillo's *Marina* (1738) focuses on Marina's story, as it is depicted in the final two acts of the play, sidelining the peregrinations of patient Pericles to the triumph of her virtue and virginity. Film adaptations of Shakespeare, such as *Ten Things I Hate About You* and Baz Lurhmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, brilliantly frame Shakespeare for the consumption of teenaged girl audiences, while the visual arts are consistently drawn to Shakespeare's girl heroines, from the

Boydell Shakespeare Gallery to Gregory Crewdson's recreation of John Everett Millais's iconic Ophelia.

Shakespeare's own involvement in the processes of appropriation and adaptation also leads him to expand upon girl characters and promote girlhood. For example, *Two Noble Kinsmen*, an adaptation of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, elaborates Chaucer's character of Emily, moving far beyond Chaucer's own expansion of the character from his source material in Boccaccio's *Teseida*. Shakespeare endows his Emilia with a rich Amazon history, including her girlfriend, Flavina. With the Jailer's Daughter, an adaptation of Ophelia, mad for love, Shakespeare embellishes his own source material, and each of the Jailer's Daughter's soliloquies, charting the progressive loss of her wits, is longer than the last. Alongside Shakespeare's creation of these major girl heroines, *Two Noble Kinsmen* opens with a procession of widows, who, no longer girls themselves, nevertheless frame the play's attention to the trials of girlhood within the larger scope of women's experiences, including those of the stalwart Hippolyta. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* adapts Ovid's Pyramus and Thisbe via a set of continental rewritings including Masuccio Salernitano's *Il Novellino* (1476), Luigi da Porto's *Giuliette e Romeo* (1530), Matteo Bandello's *Giuliette e Romeo* (1554), Pierre Boiastuau's *Histoires Tragiques* (1559), as well as, in England, Arthur Brooke's *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet* (1562) and William Painter's *Palace of Pleasure* (1567). It foregrounds Juliet's girlhood, adding precise details of her age, and developing her as a character of exquisite intelligence and powerful drive. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, of course, inspired one of the earliest adaptations of Shakespeare by William Davenant (1662), a key event in the history of women on the English stage, and the beginning of a long history of adaptations of the play that place girlhood at the forefront, from Thomas Otway's curious fusion of Juliet and Lavinia in *The History and Fall of Caius Marius* (1680) to the theatrical experiences of Viola de Lesseps in *Shakespeare in Love* (1999).

### Girls and Girlhood in Adaptations of Shakespeare

Girls thus enjoy a special place in the history of Shakespeare adaptation. And there is, in fact, a special kind of kinship between girlhood and adaptation. Adaptation has often been considered secondary, or a derivative of the original masterwork, just as women were traditionally positioned as the "second sex," with their derivative beginnings in Adam's rib. Yet as adaptations provide an opportunity for a broader set of voices to weigh in on the canonical original, including girls, they also develop a relationship to their source material that may be understood in terms of a playfulness, from witty and satirical to energetically creative: qualities that also evoke ideals of spirited girlhood.

This special issue of *Borrowers and Lenders* explores the relationships between Shakespeare, Adaptation, and Girlhood. The first group of articles, under the subheading "Screen," examines adaptations of Shakespeare for television, YouTube, and film, with each medium representing girlhood in different ways. Ariane Balizet's discussion of girls' references to, anxieties about, and relationships with Shakespeare on the small screen focuses less on the adaptation of Shakespearean plots or characters for television than on the idea of Shakespeare himself as a representative of high culture and patriarchal authority, usually in a classroom setting, casting the girls as subordinate to it. However, her examples reveal girl characters in shows from *My So-Called Life* to *Orange is the New Black* prevailing and even triumphing over Shakespearean content, reversing the expectations of inferiority and transforming Shakespeare instead, as Balizet puts it, into a "tool against marginalization."

In the context of the emphatically democratic YouTube, in Stephen O'Neill's contribution, Shakespeare's Ophelia (who has the final section of this special issue devoted to her) becomes a shared point of reference for girl YouTubers, allowing them to develop a language and ongoing conversation about girl culture, their own identities as girls, and, as O'Neill puts it, "the (im)possibility of authentic expression in the contemporary mediascape." Focusing on how girls represent themselves rather than how popular culture represents them, O'Neill reveals the constitutive role played by Ophelia in girls' self-understanding, providing not only something to identify with, but also to react against. Ophelia thus enables dialogues that are about more than just Shakespeare's girl or girls; she is a launching point for girls' interrogations of contemporary commercial media, allowing girls to "produce and perform postfeminist identities online."

Rachael McLennan's essay on *Ten Things I Hate About You*, also concerns the use of Shakespeare to construct a feminist identity. The film adapts *The Taming of the Shrew* to chart not the cultivation of an ideal, passive wife, but the evolving responses of a teenaged girl to a premature and traumatic sexual experience. The culmination of this process occurs when Kat authors a Shakespearean sonnet: a sonnet whose merits, as McLennan argues, have been overlooked and underappreciated in the numerous critical discussions of this film. The sonnet reflects Kat's girlhood as she navigates between the two poles of her own crisis and empowerment, but it also reflects predicament of 1990s girlhood caught in the aftermath of second-wave feminism and at the advent of neoliberalism.

The second group of essays, entitled "Stage," contains three essays on the stage histories of Shakespearean girls. Caroline Bicks explores the figure Mary "Perdita" Robinson, for whom the name of "Perdita" is not just a recollection of her virtuoso performance of a famous Shakespearean "girl" character, but instead, an allusion to the good name and sexual innocence that she "lost"

in her affair with the young Prince of Wales, later George IV. Locating the lingering presence of the Shakespearean Perdita in representations of Mary Robinson, Bicks highlights the interplay between the use of "Perdita" as a euphemism for "whore" and her Shakespearean status as an innocent "child of nature," revealing how her posthumously published Memoirs appropriates the girlhood of Shakespeare's Perdita in order to construct her own girlhood and defend her virgin innocence. Bicks reveals, ultimately, the extent to which girlhood itself both negotiates and is constructed in the interplay and tension between innocence and sexual knowledge, but she also locates a continuum, rather than a polarity, between the identities of woman and girl, as the adult Mary Robinson reclaims but also reshapes her own childhood.

Jo Carney's essay on *Desdemona*, Toni Morrison's radical rereading of *Othello*, the product of a collaboration with director Peter Sellars and singer-songwriter Rokia Traoré, reveals how Morrison similarly recuperates the character of Desdemona, damned by Othello as a whore, by shifting the focus to her girlhood. Ever since *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison's work has narrated the worlds and experiences of girl characters and has used Shakespeare as an ongoing counterpoint to her own fictions. In *Desdemona*, Morrison sets out the tension between social expectations of demure comportment and an approved marriage, and the sense of freedom Desdemona enjoys to play in the pond, or to imagine herself as a swan. With her North African maid, Barbary, enabling these acts of girlish wildness and imagination, Desdemona is primed and ready to listen to Othello's tales of adventure. As Desdemona's girlhood, here, is reconstructed not only retrospectively, as an adaptation of *Othello*, but also from beyond the grave, Desdemona's posthumous freedom enables the recovery of her own lost girlhood.

My own essay on the lost girlhoods of *The Tempest* concerns the afterlives of Miranda and Ariel on stage and film. A crucial aspect of Miranda's girlhood, I argue, is lost to a longstanding editorial and theatrical tradition that refuses to accept her talking back to Caliban, while the two-hundred-year-long history of casting a girl as Ariel is often dismissed as an outmoded and déclassé theatrical convention. In marked contrast to these suppressions of Prospero's girls, Restoration adaptations of *The Tempest* added girl after girl to Prospero's island, reflecting the play's overarching concern with girls and girlhood, as it charts the path to Miranda's marriage and Ariel's freedom — domestic reality and girlhood wish.

The three essays in the final group all focus on Ophelia, Shakespeare's paradigmatic girl-as-innocent-victim. Polonius calls her a "green girl, /Unsifted in such perilous circumstance," and Ophelia's afterlife, from the Jailer's Daughter in *Two Noble Kinsmen* to the performances of Kate Winslet and Julia Stiles, via John Everett Millais and countless nineteenth-century paintings, shaped representations of female madness, as Elaine Showalter has argued. They also inform more

contemporary understandings of teen-girl anguish, as Mary Pipher's well-known *Reviving Ophelia*. The Tiquun collective, "Raw Materials for the Theory of a Young-Girl," which links the fetish for girlhood in contemporary commodity culture with the triumph of capitalism and the decline of the women's movement, opens with Hamlet's devastating words to Ophelia: "I did love you once." But Natalia Khomenko's essay on Soviet representations of Ophelia offers a startlingly different take on Ophelia as a corrupt and untrustworthy villain. What, in the West, serves as confirmation of her innocent girlhood is transformed, in the Soviet context, into evidence of moral decadence and bourgeois indulgence. This allows for the celebration of Hamlet as a political revolutionary, but it also takes Ophelia quite seriously as a villain. As Khomenko demonstrates, this vilification of Ophelia, however unfair it seems, provides feminist authors post-1991 with a rich opportunity to reclaim and remodel — dare we say revive? — this long-maligned heroine.

Dianne Berg's discussion of Mary Cowden Clarke's Ophelia explores the earliest and most influential attempt to fictionalize Ophelia's girlhood and, interestingly, provides another example of what she calls "abuse" — in this case, not by recasting Ophelia as a villain, but, instead, by promoting her wide-eyed, even vapid innocence, and, moreover, by inflicting upon her a set of traumas that provide extra background for her madness. Ophelia becomes an object lesson in vulnerable girlhood — an example of how important it is to take care of young girls — and part of a general tendency in Cowden Clarke (and in Victorian society as a whole) to underestimate and eliminate the agency of girls by constructing them as material to be molded. But Jenny Flaherty shows how contemporary young adult novels succeed in positively "reviving Ophelia," representing her as a survivor, with strength of character and numerous capabilities, rather than as a fragile victim, even as they use Ophelia's sense of being marginalized and an outsider to resonate with contemporary teenaged alienation. Reading a premodern text and heroine unabashedly through the lens of feminist theory and criticism, these novels thus successfully manage to, as Showalter puts it, "liberate Ophelia from the text."

To liberate Ophelia from the text: this is the project of adapting and appropriating all of Shakespeare's girls. The dream of liberation resonates, as well, with a variety of conditions in which girlhood is experienced. In some cases, girls require liberation from their circumstances: the freedom to be themselves apart from social and familial stricture. In others, girlhood offers a space for freedom, possibility, and creativity before the choices and responsibilities of adulthood. In some cases, girlhood is constrained by a materialistic and capitalist system that seeks to commodify their sexuality for private gain. In others, popular images of the young girl provide a spur and pretext for a satirical and subversive critique of the complicity of the commodification of girlhood with the triumph of neo-liberalism and the ideologically motivated perception of the failure of feminism.



As the adaptations and appropriations of Shakespearean girlhood that are collected here engage with and contend against a set of inherited and idealized notions of girlhood that may be traced to Shakespeare, they also reflect the creative energies and independence of thought that Shakespeare himself linked, time and again, with girls.

### Notes

1. For discussion of these terms see Deanne Williams, *Shakespeare and the Performance of Girlhood* (2014), 4-5.

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