

Shakespeare and the Performance of Girlhood. Deanne Williams.

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In *Shakespeare and the Performance of Girlhood*, Deanne Williams calls her introduction “Girls Included!” The chapter title was inspired by schoolyard exchanges from Williams’s youth where boys attempted to exclude girls from games by declaring “girls not included,” and in response, the girls defiantly declared, “girls included!” (16). Although deeply grounded in the historical period of early modern England, Williams remains aware throughout her examination of Shakespeare’s girls that the stories we tell about the past help shape who we believe we are in the present. References to Malala Yousafzai’s inspirational support for girls’ education in Afghanistan and the *Because I Am a Girl*

Project frame a capacious exploration of Shakespeare's girl characters, those who are called a "girl," such as Juliet, and those who evoke conceptions of girlhood, such as the queen in *Richard II*. Girls are not just included in Williams's book: they take center stage.

As part of the Palgrave Shakespeare Studies series, the book has an extended focus on Shakespeare, with part 1, "Shakespeare's Girls," making up around 60 percent of the whole. Part 1 balances close attention to specific characters and texts with a strong sense of the sheer number of neglected girls in Shakespeare's plays. Chapter 1 explores "Peevish and Perverse" girls in Shakespeare's plays, showing how often characters like Julietta in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and Katherina in *Taming of the Shrew* resist traditionally submissive feminine roles. Chapter 2 explores the interpretive possibilities of thinking of the queen in *Richard II* as a child bride who has had to learn to navigate a foreign political system, while chapter 3 offers a reading of the differences between Ophelia as a girl in Q1 *Hamlet* as compared to Ophelia in Q2 and the Folio. The final chapter in the first part, "Lost Girls," rethinks how we see the girls of *Pericles*, *The Tempest*, and *The Winter's Tale* when set in relationship to the retrospective Jacobean attention to Elizabeth I's childhood, which was not much discussed until after the queen's death.

Shakespeare continues to be a touchstone for Williams in parts 2 and 3, but the focus shifts from Shakespeare to girl performers and girl writers. If the purpose of part 1 is to insist that girls are not absent from Shakespeare, the final two sections aim to redress the absence of girls from histories of performance and writing more generally. Part 2, "Stages of Girlhood," has chapters focused on Princess Elizabeth Stuart and Lady Alice Egerton that demonstrate the centrality of girls to the masque tradition. Part 3, "Writing Girls," engages in case studies of aristocratic girls who wrote plays, offering one chapter on Rachel Fane, whose manuscript notebooks have been understudied, and Jane Cavendish and Elizabeth Brackley, whose play *The Concealed Fancies* has received some critical attention as "women's writing," but which Williams reframes as girls' writing.

At the heart of *Shakespeare and the Performance of Girlhood* is the thesis that girlhood in early modern England was performative. Girls, in Williams's account, played gendered parts, but parts that they could perform in their own way. She describes early modern girlhood as a fiction that was "creatively and imaginatively enabling" (5), leading Shakespeare's girl characters to have compelling "cultural afterlives" that "extend to the present day" (6). Drawing on "theatrical, literary, and musical paradigms," Williams argues that Shakespeare's girls "enable performances of girlhood that are not attached to age or biological sex, just as they originate in the bodies and voices of the boy actor" (210). The orientation of the argument is in line with the school of thought sometimes described as revisionist feminism, a term for criticism that focuses on female agency and the limits of patriarchal power. For example, Williams describes Shakespeare in *The Concealed Fancies* as a "benevolent authority figure, who gives the girls something which they feel free to reject or transform into something that is more like them" (206). There is, of course, a limit to that play. As Williams acknowledges in her chapter on *Hamlet*, "Ophelia is more tragic, more wronged" in the more popular Q2 and Folio

versions of the script, whereas the Q1 Ophelia is “given greater agency and greater respect” (90). Performance offers great possibilities, but the script given to girls makes a difference.

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