

Jennifer Higginbotham. *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Sisters: Gender, Transgression, Adolescence*.

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In *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet's nurse calculates her charge's age with reference to an assortment of memories and commonplaces associated with early modern girlhood. If Juliet's mother can only say that her child is "not fourteen," the nurse knows Juliet's age "unto an hour," and links the child's infancy with her inevitable future as a wife. Recounting an accident where the girl "broke her brow," the nurse tells us that her husband took up the child and asked her: "'dost thou fall upon thy face? / Thou wilt fall backward when thou has more wit'" (1.3.40–45). Juliet's middle years disappear altogether in this picture of her life as a series of falls, her adolescence bridging one toppled state to another. Any learning or friendships or discovery of powers that we associate with childhood is made unimaginable, and the brief companionship Juliet apparently enjoyed with her now-dead playmate Susan (the nurse's daughter, most likely) is important because it was temporary, the mark of an era — or emotional investment — that has no value, a liminal space that is utterly empty.

Jennifer Higginbotham's remarkable new book *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Sisters* not only recovers this period for us but also suggests that early modern authors took enormous pains to represent the importance of girlhood, viewing femaleness in multiple ways. Writers represented girlhood variously, but routinely, as a period before marriage, as a way of imagining adult women who never married, as a form of unruliness that disrupted class and gender systems in ways that boys or women did not, and as characterizing the lives of female servants who couldn't be neatly imagined as wives or mothers — or nurses. Cleopatra's serving women — her "noble girls" — belong to this category, as do roaring girls like Moll Cutpurse, and Shakespeare's abandoned Perdita.

Higginbotham investigates how female youth was redefined by pedagogical, medical, rhetorical, and theatrical texts so that words like *wench*, *damsel*, *maid*, and *virgin* gradually yielded to the term *girl* (21). Girlhood continued to describe

something “crucial and contested” (1), however, a femaleness that was not only sexually “but also . . . socially and politically resistant” to occupying its “womanly place” (9). It’s not always clear how Shylock’s Jessica or Petruchio’s Katherina fits into Higginbotham’s framework, since their unruliness is clearly associated with marriage; that they are daughters who rebel rather than brides whose marriages test social constraints might be developed more fully. But Higginbotham’s discussion of Isabella Whitney and Rachel Fane, who write about (and see themselves in terms of) early modern girlhood is excellent, as is chapter 3’s exploration of plays concerned with female infants. In a fascinating treatment of Shakespeare’s *Winter’s Tale*, Higginbotham observes that its “staging of female infancy . . . consciously supersedes the story of boyhood” (118).

One wonders if we only hear about early modern girls when they are unruly, and whether unruly girls always roar. What about early modern girls who merely read or write? That this book made me curious about the girlhoods of Elizabeth and Mary Tudor, Jane Grey, and Spenser’s Britomart suggests how rich an area Higginbotham has uncovered for us. But how early modern anxieties about girlhood shape later imaginings seems to belong to Higginbotham’s discussion, too, and some discussion of developments like Aphra Behn’s *The History of The Nun* (1688) or Richardson’s *Clarissa* would be useful, as would some consideration of the young women at Bridewell whose lives are explored by Fiona McNeill’s *Poor Women in Shakespeare* (2007). And what about sisters or female friends — or the question of how girls might be unruly together? Jami Ake claims that *Twelfth Night* explores lesbian desire as a crucial aspect of girlhood (“Glimpsing a ‘Lesbian’ Poetics in *Twelfth Night*,” *SEL* 43.2 [2003]: 389), and Shakespeare’s pairing of the dead Susan with Juliet need not only point to tragedy.

But I admire the depth and breadth of Higginbotham’s argument, and the wonderful attention to sources from the worlds of medicine, theater, poetry, and pedagogy. Not only does Higginbotham expertly argue that girlhood was frequently presented as a time of and setting for learning, subversion, and agency, but she also shows how writers of the period understood this potential, and frequently fashioned stories with girls at their center—not (yet) women, not all brides, but clearly human, and often free.

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