

**Gendering Childhood in Shakespeare's England**  
**Seminar Leader: Jennifer Higginbotham**

**ABSTRACTS**

Susan Dunn-Hensley

I am interested in examining what gender constructions of children in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* and Milton's *The Masque at Ludlow Castle* can tell us about early modern attitudes concerning gender. I intend to discuss the ways in which Shakespeare's consideration of childhood, including his presentation of Mamillius and Perdita, at times affirms and at other times subverts traditional gender roles. I also intend to examine Milton's *A Maske Presented at Ludow Castle*. Milton's masque proves particularly interesting not only because of his focus on "militant" virginity and his creation of a resourceful young heroine, but also because the role of the heroine is played by fifteen year old Alice Egerton. Although Lady Alice's brothers appear in the masque, she fills the lead role, which pits her youthful innocence against the lascivious desires of Comus, the son of Circe. The presence of the real body of a female "child" in a lead role about militant virginity allows for interesting examination of the ways in which traditional gender expectations could be modified and even subverted.

Emily Ruth Isaacson

"Did the Puritans Have Daughters?: The Gendered Childhood of the Conduct Books"

Advice literature abounded in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, including a huge number of treatises on the structure of the family. Typically, the authors of these texts identified the family as a structural unit based on a hierarchical relationship with the householder, or male head of household – the husband and wife, the parent and child, the master and servant. Some of the books, like William Gouge's *Of Domesticall Duties*, focus not only on the duties owed to the householder, but also on his responsibilities to the subordinates, both in earthly/bodily matters and spiritual matters. The sections on parents and children, while obliquely acknowledging the presence of the mother, primarily focus on the role of the father in this family. The responsibilities that the father has for his children include the very important role of catechizing the children – in concern for their spiritual health – and the even more important role of preparing the children for their future lives as productive and honest citizens of London. Generally, this includes discussion of disciplining the child; it also includes the very important considerations of placing the child in a position to take on a good trade and to ensure that the child has some inheritance (earned only through honest means) after the parent has died. Oddly, these pieces of advice deal only with male children, despite the fact that families would have been particularly responsible for daughters' fates as well. Daughters, of course, abound in the plays of the period – as in *The Tempest* or *King Lear*, or Massinger's *The City Madam*, or Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*. Often,

these texts imagine the problem of situating a daughter as – and with – a suitable marriage partner. Certainly, the relationship between a father and his son was different than the relationship between the father and his daughter, as Ben Jonson’s poems on his children suggest. However, the conduct books – with one exception in the translated *The Court of Good Councill*, which is not by a Puritan – generally shy away from any substantial discussion of daughters as part of the family. Given the ultimate importance of the father for securing his daughter’s future by placing her with a good husband or in a good position as a maidservant, this seems out of joint. Thus, this paper will explore this odd gendering of childhood – and of familial responsibilities of parenting in these London texts, ultimately asking the question of the title: did the Puritans even have daughters?

Potential reading list (Things I’ll likely look at):

Robert Abbot, *A Christian family Builded by God, Directing all governours of Families how to act*

John Clever and Robert Dod, *A Godly Form of Household Government*

William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties: Eight Treatises\**

Matthew Griffith, *Bethel: Or a Forme for families*

Stefano Guazzo, *The Covrt of Good Councill. Wherein is set downe the true rules, how a man*

*should choose a good Wife from a bad, and a woman a good Husband from a bad.*

R. R., *The Householder’s Helpe, for Domesticall Discipline.\**

\* I will most certainly attend to those texts marked with an asterisk. The others are ones that I’ve consulted and may or may not appear in the version of this paper that I’ll present at SAA.

Mark Albert Johnston

“(En)Gendering Bastards in Early Modern Drama”

Several recent discussions of early modern childhood suggest that children were ambivalently-coded, capable of gesturing in multiple historical, social, generic, and theatrical directions. In a period in which childbirth was fraught with dangers for both mother and child, and life itself was often brief and tenuous, children represented hope for the future, for succession, and for perpetuity. But children did not solely gesture forward historically toward the adults they hoped eventually to become; as Shakespeare's early sonnets encouraging his male beloved to marry and provide the world a copy of himself suggest, children also pointed backward to their own sites of origin, to the lives of the parental figures whom the children act as mirror images or reproductions of. Since contemporary medicine disseminated the Aristotelian view that children were a product of a combination of both male and female seed produced during orgasm, children also signal the sexual pleasures of their parents. That pleasure often registers, particularly in relation to mothers, as excessive, unchecked, and potentially illicit.

This paper explores the significance of children in early modern English culture and drama as materializations—and occasionally even objects—of errant female sexual desire and pleasure. How do representations of children that function pejoratively to evince female lasciviousness, carnality, and aberrant sexuality gender those children themselves? If gender primarily registers social degree and identity, then might the bastard child figure as belonging to a separate gender altogether? Is the significance of bastardy dependent upon class context? The essay will consider the degree to which children generally signaled parental (but particularly maternal) sexuality before assessing whether or not bastard children constituted their own gender in the period. I plan to consider a broad range of early modern drama, including Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, *King Lear*, *King John*, and *Richard III*, Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*, and John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*.

Edel Lamb

'if ever thou hast red stories': Education, Reading and the Gendering of Childhood

### **Abstract**

This paper will explore the ways in which literacy lessons and early reading experiences gendered childhood in Shakespeare's England. Beginning with a comparative analysis of the representation of schoolboys in John Marston's *What You Will* (1601) and of schoolgirls in *The Wit of a Woman* (1604), it will investigate the extent to which education in reading and the content and materiality of children's texts distinguished between boyhood and girlhood and aimed to inculcate masculine and feminine traits in young readers. While recent scholarship has lavished attention on the gendering of early modern boyhood, this paper will raise fresh questions about theoretical models of gender and childhood through its examination of the figure of the girl. It will focus on representations of schoolgirl reading across a range of genres (including dramatic texts and personal accounts) to evaluate the role of reading in gendering girlhood and in the production of an appropriate, feminine adulthood in early modern culture.

### **Primary Texts**

Anon., *The Wit of a Woman* (1604)

John Marston, *What You Will* (1601)

Donna J. Long

"Qualities Befitting Their Sex: Learning Gender Identity"

The stages of life represented in early modern literary and non-fiction texts are notable for the relative absence of childhood. Scholars have attributed this absence to reasons ranging from lack of parental affection to high mortality rates to an under-appreciated system of women-centered care and nurture. Others, like Erica Fudge, have considered whether children in the period were even considered human. As an ideal, women worked

in more domestic than social spheres. Thus the work they did—including childcare—may understandably be relatively invisible; however, this is not the same thing as deeming the work unimportant.

The meaning and purpose of children in the period have been charted by numerous scholars. Leah Marcus argues that seventeenth-century Anglicans considered “childhood . . . a symbolic link with an idealized England gone by,” while Puritans found children to be “the best hope for a better England” (43). The Roman Catholic faith considered a child free “of mortal sin until the age of seven” but, as Fudge notes, where Catholicism heard innocence in a child’s laughter, Calvinists heard “innate . . . sinfulness” (286). While some scholars have suggested that the similar dress of boys and girls until the age of seven provided a gender-neutral, or androgynous, experience, the privilege afforded a male child is well documented (the birth of a daughter first at least *promised* the possibility of a son).

Normative masculinity allows that males are never quite invisible while, in literature, females typically emerge at puberty. The woman desiring sex and capable of reproduction has been a far more popular, and troublesome, character than females at any other stage of life. However, as learned behavior gender is not something that happens to us all at once. We learn to recognize both the fluidity of gender and its boundaries by reactions to gendered behavior (thus learning to act, arguably, in ways that lead to praise rather than punishment, a la Stephen Greenblatt). The ability to negotiate gender identity, to wield it like a weapon, as Queen Elizabeth did at Tilbury, for example, requires the ability to recognize gender as a tool. Jonson’s “ripe daughters” in “To Penshurst” may realize they are emblems of gender just as the fruit they arrive bearing is emblematic of their reproductive ability. Even the Sepulchrine nuns at Liege employed the language of fecundity to describe how the “young gentlewomen” in their charge would be educated “until they be ripe enough to choose some state of life” (Walker 409).

My essay will survey a variety of mostly non-fiction texts—letters, diaries, autobiographical poems—to uncover gendered instruction and behavior embedded in social practice and privilege. I will work largely with texts by or about women, including Elizabeth Russell (née Cooke), Lucy Hutchinson and Mary Evelyn, as they recount their own childhood experiences and account for raising successfully gendered children.

Dolan, Frances E. “Gender and the ‘Lost’ Spaces of Catholicism.” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 32.4, 2002. 641-665. Print

Fudge, Erica. “Learning to laugh: children and being human in early modern thought.” *Textual Practice* 17.2, 2003. 277-294. Print.

Gowing, Laura. *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words and Sex in Early Modern England*. Oxford: OUP, 1999.

Greenblatt, Stephen. “Culture.”

Marcus, Leah. *Childhood and Cultural Despair: A Theme and Variations in Seventeenth-Century Literature*. Pittsburgh: PUP, 1978.

Matchinske, Megan. *Writing, Gender, and State in Early Modern England: Identity Formation and the Female Subject*. Cambridge: CUP 1998.

Nicholson, Linda. "Interpreting Gender." *Signs* 20.1, 1994. 79-105. Print.

Walker, Claire. "Combining Martha and Mary: Gender and Work in Seventeenth-Century English Cloisters." *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 30.2, 1999. 397-418. Print.

Bethany Packard

"Foundlings and Fostering in *The Faerie Queene*"

I approach the question of what gender contributes to early modern representations of childhood through a particular childrearing strategy: fostering. I focus on wet-nurses and foster mothers as key figures in the circulation of children, circulation that occurred in many forms: apprenticeships, wardships, training in another household of similar rank. This circulation approach to child development contrasts with emphasis on lineal descent and inheritance within a family. Interaction between the linear and circular versions of reproduction and childrearing is made visible in the context of the late 16<sup>th</sup> century conflict in Ireland.

I engage with Edmund Spenser's *A View of the State of Ireland* and the often foundling infants of his *Faerie Queene*, emphasizing that fostering appears as both a rhetorical and practical strategy. Spenser and his compatriots attempt to externalize rhetorical tactics for both molding child figures and ensuring cultural continuity into the Irish struggle. They stress maintaining and simultaneously creating the Englishness of New English babies born in the Pale as a means of creating a boundary against the Irish and the encroaching Irishness of the Old English. Spenser warns against the potential for bad wet nurses to infect good infants and to disrupt the purportedly natural, linear, structure of the family. Gender thus serves as a lens for viewing the interactions of the circular and linear models. Infancy was commonly thought to be the period of greatest malleability, yet infants are also virtually impossible to discipline. Numerous writers addressed this difficulty by encouraging attempts to control impressionable babies through wet-nurses.

I focus on *Faerie* children, particularly Amoret and Belphoebe, Ruddymane and the Bruin baby, and their foster mothers to explore the ways that gender impacts depictions of malleability in children and the relative influences of biological versus foster parents. While the gender of Spenser's foundling children does not overtly influence their degrees of malleability, their circulation among foster families is inflected by the gendering of their various parents. For example, Mordant's feminization influences Ruddymane's susceptibility to bloodstains. I will analyze the influences of parental figures in the poem and their relation to Spenser's assertions in *View*. Good English babies were supposed to

be props for parental and national ambition, guaranteeing the future while simultaneously repairing the mistakes of the past. However, these malleable babies fail to support faulty tales of superiority.

Primary Texts:

*A View of the State of Ireland*

*Faerie Queene*, particularly II.i.36-61, II.ii.1-10, III.vi.1-29, VI.iv, 29-38

Emily Detmer-Goebel

“Gender and Parental Bereavement in Shakespeare’s England”

Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford suggest in their excellent work, *Women in Early Modern England*, that parents seem to experience the loss of a male child as a greater loss than that of a female child. Yet, they also call this conclusion into question by pointing to diaries and letters that suggest otherwise. At one level, differential treatment of grief based on gender might be a safe assumption given primogeniture (and the patriarchal cultural in general) which depends on male inheritance. Yet, by exploring the dramatic depiction of child loss in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, as well as non-dramatic texts, my seminar paper will explore the impact of gender on parental bereavement to conclude that individuals who experience the loss of a child as devastating show little regard for gender bias. Yet, there is a case to be made that a parent’s sense of loss may be different based on the child’s gender. The gender difference seems to reside in what each child seems to represent to the parent. Individual traits and relationships aside, girl children, for example, often seem to represent physical help and comfort; boy children represent a marker of a name, an inheritance and the future. Thus, it is not that parents seem to love one gender more than the other, but a parent (of either gender) might suffer the loss differently.