# *Shakespeare* and Childhood

EDITED BY
Kate Chedgzoy,
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CAMBRIDGE

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# SHAKESPEARE AND CHILDHOOD

This collection offers the first definitive study of a surprisingly underdeveloped area of scholarly investigation, namely the relationship between Shakespeare, children and childhood, from Shakespeare's time to the present. It offers a thorough, multi-perspectival mapping of the domain in which Shakespearean childhoods need to be studied, in order to show how studying Shakespearean childhoods makes significant contributions both to Shakespearean scholarship, and to the history of childhood and its representations. The book is divided into two sections, each with a substantial introduction outlining relevant critical debates and contextualizing the rich combination of new research and re-readings of familiar Shakespearean texts that characterize the individual essays. The first part of the book examines the complex significance of the figure of the child in the Shakespearean canon and within early modern theatrical and literary culture. The second part traces the rich histories of negotiation, exchange and appropriation that have characterized Shakespeare's subsequent relations to the cultures of childhood in the literary, educational, theatrical and cinematic realms.

KATE CHEDGZOY is Professor of Renaissance Literature at the University of Newcastle.

SUSANNE GREENHALGH is Principal Lecturer at the School of Arts, Roehampton University.

ROBERT SHAUGHNESSY is Professor of Theatre in the School of Drama, Film and Visual Arts at the University of Kent.

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# *Notes on contributors*

PASCALE AEBISCHER is Lecturer in Renaissance Studies at the University of Exeter. She is the author of *Shakespeare's Violated Bodies: Stage and Screen Performances* (2004) and principal editor of *Remaking Shakespeare: Performance Across Media, Genres and Cultures* (2003). She has written a number of articles on Shakespeare, performance, drama theory, nineteenth-century theatrical memoirs and Henry Green. She is currently writing a book on Jacobean drama (forthcoming, 2009) and researching the role played by Shakespeare in Victorian theatrical memoirs.

CATHERINE BELSEY is Research Professor in the English Department at the University of Wales, Swansea. Her books include *Critical Practice* (1980), *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (1985), *Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden* (1999), and *Why Shakespeare?* (2007).

RICHARD BURT is Professor of English and Film and Media Studies at the University of Florida. He is the author of *Unspeakable ShaXXXspeares: Queer Theory and American Kiddie Culture* (1998) and co-author of *Movie Medievalism: Projecting the Past in Film and Media* (2007). Burt is also the editor of *Shakespeare After Mass Media* (2001) and *Shakespeares After Shakespeare: An Encyclopedia of the Bard in Mass Culture and Popular Culture* (2006) and co-editor of *Shakespeare, the Movie, II* (2003). He is presently finishing a book entitled *Alluding to Shakespeare: the Remains of the Play in Transnational Cinema and Television.*

KATE CHEDGZOY is Professor of Renaissance Literature at the University of Newcastle. She is the author of *Shakespeare's Queer Children: Sexual Politics and Contemporary Culture* (1996), and co-editor with Susanne Greenhalgh of a special issue of the journal *Shakespeare* on Shakespeare's incorporation into the cultures of childhood (2006). Her book *Women's Writing in the British Atlantic World: Memory, Place and History, 1550–1700* will be published by Cambridge University Press in 2007.

HATTIE FLETCHER is a freelance writer and the managing editor of the literary journal *Creative Nonfiction*. Formerly a middle-school Latin and English teacher, she is working on a manuscript about teaching and is pursuing an MFA in creative writing from the University of Pittsburgh.

SUSANNE GREENHALGH is Principal Lecturer in Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies at Roehampton University, London, where she also teaches Film and Media Studies. She has published many articles, on topics including children's literature in the media, children's drama, and Shakespeare on radio and television. She is currently researching a book, *At Home with Shakespeare*, on the experience and reception of Shakespeare in the domestic setting.

MARK LAWHORN is Assistant Professor of English in the Department of Languages, Linguistics, and Literature at the University of Hawaii-Kapiolani. He is the author of several articles on children and early modern English drama and is Vice-President of Children's Literature Hawaii.

NAOMI J. MILLER is Professor of English and Women's Studies at Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts. In addition to books and articles on women writers in the Renaissance, her research and creative interests include Shakespeare for children. Her recent volume of essays, *Reimagining Shakespeare for Children* (2003), includes essays by children's book authors, Shakespeare scholars, and teachers of Shakespeare at all levels. She is currently working on a novel adapting Shakespeare's *The Tempest* for a young adult audience.

LUCY MUNRO is Lecturer in English at Keele University. Her publications include *Children of the Queen's Revels: A Jacobean Theatre Repertory* (Cambridge, 2005), an edition of Edward Sharpham's *The Fleer* (2006), and various essays on early modern drama. She is a contributing editor to the *RSC Complete Works of Shakespeare* and to forthcoming major editions of the works of James Shirley and Richard Brome.

MARIANNE NOVY is a professor of English and Women's Studies at the University of Pittsburgh. Her most recent books are *Imagining Adoption: Essays on Literature and Culture* (2001), an edited collection, and *Reading Adoption: Family and Difference in Fiction and Drama* (2005). She has also written *Love's Argument: Gender Relations in Shakespeare* (1984) and *Engaging with Shakespeare: Responses of George Eliot and Other Women Novelists* (1994), and edited three collections of essays on women's

revisions of Shakespeare. Her current work is on Shakespeare's representations of outsiders.

PATRICIA PHILLIPPY is Professor of English at Texas A&M University. Her most recent publications are *Women, Death and Literature in Post-Reformation England* (Cambridge, 2002) and *Painting Women: Cosmetics, Canvases and Early Modern Culture* (2005). She is currently at work on an interdisciplinary study of the place of gender in the creation of funerary monuments and epitaphs in early modern England.

A. J. PIESSE is Senior Lecturer at Trinity College Dublin, where she works in the areas of Renaissance drama and children's literature. She has published articles variously on moral interludes, morality plays, the language of the Reformation, and Shakespeare; in the area of children's literature, she has written mostly on twentieth-century Irish writing and has a special interest in older people in books for children.

KATHRYN PRINCE is a Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada postdoctoral research fellow at Birkbeck, University of London. Her work on Shakespeare reception before the twentieth century has already yielded a PhD thesis and several forthcoming articles, and is the focus of her current research for a book entitled *England, France, and the Shakespeare Controversy from the French Revolution to World War I.* She is also writing the *Much Ado About Nothing* volume for Manchester University Press's *Shakespeare in Performance* series.

ROBERT SHAUGHNESSY is Professor of Theatre at the University of Kent. His publications include *Representing Shakespeare: England, History and the RSC* (1994), *The Shakespeare Effect: A History of Twentieth-Century Performance* (2002), and, as editor, *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Popular Culture* (2007).

# *Note on the text*

Throughout this volume, unless otherwise specified, all references to Shakespeare's plays cite *The Norton Shakespeare, Based on the Oxford Edition*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard and Katharine Eisaman Maus (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997).

# *Contents*

# *Introduction*

*Robert Shaughnessy*

On the front cover of this book is a detail from a photograph, taken in 1930, of a group of some thirty children in an amateur performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, designed and directed by Rowena Cade for the open-air theatre at Minack in Cornwall.[1] Standing, crouching and kneeling before a woodland backdrop, some with arms draped over others' shoulders, others clutching garlands and long wands (excepting one figure towards the extreme left of the picture, who scowls at the camera, arms defiantly folded), these young persons range in age from preschool to teenage. Clad in home-sewn tights, tunics, acorn-cup headgear and (for Oberon and Titania) cloaks and ruffs, the members of this motley assembly of elves, sprites and pixies squint uncomfortably into the glare of an English sun that strips the sylvan scene of any vestige of nocturnal mystery or magic. Still, the broad provenance of this memento of Shakespearean performance is readily identifiable, even if the nature of the children's investment in the event it commemorates is not; it images a relationship between Shakespeare, childhood and performance that is liable to provoke a variety of reactions, ranging from indulgent amusement to faint nausea. On the one hand, the conjunction of the child, the fairy, performance and Shakespeare may evoke a lost time and space of naïve pleasure and innocent make-believe, a prospect to be contemplated with deep nostalgia, as befitting the *Dream*'s special status as the scene of many Shakespeare-lovers' first encounter with the Bard.[2] On the other hand, the stern faces of this particular cast of juveniles, which suggest that few of them are actually having much fun, may also remind us that the ideal of childhood performance to which the image alludes is a retrospective adult fantasy, one shaped not only by a careful monitoring and censorship of the less than child-friendly dimensions of Shakespeare's play, but also by a partial and selective understanding of the nature of childhood itself, of what it is and of what it is made to signify.

For those who believe that *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Shakespeare more generally, is for grown-ups, there is something faintly embarrassing about this vision of a performance vocabulary that is still current at the turn of the twenty-first century; while for those whose business it is to make the writer and his works available and attractive to the young, there is little in it to suggest that Shakespeare might be in any way cool. Stationed at the boundary of a dark forest which they are best off not to enter just yet, the children can be seen to occupy a threshold, or liminal, space more thoroughly overdetermined than either they or their photographer probably realized: costumed for the play but not yet engaged in performance of it, and thus inhabiting the realm between theatre and the everyday, between nature and nurturing culture, and between reality, desire and dreams, the child-as-fairy poses as an awkward, makeshift hybrid, epitomizing adult ambivalences about what to make of, and how to deal with, his or her beguiling and disquieting otherness.

One would not want to read too much into what is, after all, only a snapshot taken on the margins of Shakespearean performance history. But the mixed emotions that it involves may provide one kind of clue as to why, despite the complex and varied significances of the figure of the child in the Shakespearean canon and within early modern culture, and despite the rich histories of negotiation, exchange and appropriation that have characterized the works' subsequent relations to the cultures of childhood in the literary, educational, theatrical and cinematic realms, the subject matter of this volume has, until relatively recently, been a surprisingly underdeveloped area of scholarly investigation. As far as the first three centuries of Shakespearean criticism were concerned, the children in, behind or implied by Shakespeare's plays were intermittently seen but rarely heard about (and certainly not heard). Initially, the references to children and childhood were anecdotal, incidental or pejorative: Shakespeare's own boyhood and youth is briefly mentioned in Nicholas Rowe's biographical sketch of 1709, in the shape of the mythical episode of juvenile delinquency (deer poaching) that resulted in his departure from Warwickshire. For Alexander Pope, Shakespeare's youthful exuberance and inexperience accounts for the 'irregularity' of his drama, 'more like an ancient majestick piece of *Gothic* Architecture' than 'a neat Modern building', in which 'many of the parts are childish, ill-plac'd, and unequal to its grandeur'.[3]

The emergence of a conception of Shakespeare as a 'child of nature' towards the end of the eighteenth century, the formation of a new market

of juvenile readers of Shakespeare, and the increasing importance of children and childhood more generally within the cultural imaginary, shifted the terms of reference to a certain extent, but even the Romantic critics demonstrated little sustained interest in the topic: Samuel Taylor Coleridge's musings on Shakespeare's 'fondness for children', for example, went no further than a brief manuscript note listing 'his Arthur; the sweet scene in the *Winter's Tale* between Hermione and the little prince; nay, even Evans's examination of Mrs Page's school-boy'.[4] Edmund Dowden's widely read and influential manual of Victorian Shakespearean interpretation, *Shakspere: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art* (1875), adopted an evolutionary approach to the author's development 'from youth to full maturity' but passed over his formative years fairly speedily, and refers to children in the plays themselves only once, in the form of a fatherly pat on the heads of the 'exquisite girlish figures' of the last plays, 'children who have known no sorrow, over whom is shed a magical beauty, an ideal light, while above them Shakspere is seen, as it were, bowing tenderly'.[5]

The high Victorian sentiment of this picture of idealized girlhood as the locus of embodiment of innocence, purity and grace hardly needs elaborating upon (and might be usefully contrasted with the appropriation of Shakespeare's girlhoods by earlier nineteenth-century writers such as Mary Cowden Clarke and Anna Jameson), but its legacy is still evident at the beginning of the twentieth century in the more restrained, though still pretty idealized, perception of the Shakespearean child that is offered in the criticism of Dowden's major immediate successor, A. C. Bradley. Pausing for a moment in his analysis of *Macbeth* in *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904), Bradley remarks on the 'somewhat curious' appearance of 'Shakespeare's boys' in 'tragic or semi-tragic dramas', citing Arthur and Mamillius as examples of Shakespeare's 'power of pathos'; as a group, the boys are 'affectionate, frank, brave, high-spirited ... amusing and charming as well as pathetic; comical in their mingled acuteness and *naïveté*, charming in their confidence in themselves and the world, and in the seriousness with which they receive the jocosity of their elders'.[6] As far as Bradley and his contemporary readers were concerned, this was all that needed to be said on the topic of Shakespeare's children, but this did not stop him being taken to task in the early 1930s by L. C. Knights, who notoriously posed in rhetorical form the question that Bradley didn't ask ('How Many Children had Lady Macbeth?') in order to discredit what he saw as the kind of irresponsibly speculative, character-based criticism in which 'the detective interest supersedes the critical'.[7] The question is not

worth debating, or even considering, because it is irrelevant to the task of working out how the Shakespearean text 'communicates a rich and controlled experience by means of words – words used in a way to which, without some training, we are no longer accustomed to respond';[8] the last thing the serious critic wants to be bothered by in this context is a group of pesky hypothetical kids. Even so, but not really surprisingly, the child also serves another rhetorical purpose in Knights's discourse, which is to act as a marker of the difference between naïve and sophisticated responses to the text: 'in school children are taught to think that they have "appreciated" the poet if they are able to talk about the characters'.[9]

Knights's polemical formalism is representative of a major strand of mid-twentieth-century criticism in terms of a preoccupation with dehumanized textuality seemingly at odds with the historical and cultural concerns that underpin this collection; though, as Carol Chillington Rutter observes, it is somewhat ironic that the critical text which is widely regarded as brilliantly exemplary of the New Critical method advocated by Knights (Cleanth Brooks's 'The Naked Babe and the Cloak of Manliness' (1947)) comprehensively demonstrates the centrality of infancy, children and childhood to the image structure of *Macbeth*.[10] In the past few decades, there has been a small but steady stream of articles and essays dealing with aspects of the relationship between Shakespeare, children and childhood, and early modern children have, from the early part of the twentieth century onwards, featured as historical subjects rather than metaphors in a number of works investigating the linked phenomena of the boy player and the chorister companies.[11] By and large, however, the critical and imaginative tradition which has engaged most directly and fully with the broadest spectrum of Shakespearean childhoods has been primarily addressed to young readers themselves, from the Lambs' *Tales from Shakespear* (1807) through to the school editions and related educational materials currently in widespread use. It is, I suggest, not coincidental that this pattern of critical production and consumption has historically tended to reflect a gender divide as well as a generational one. As Ann Thompson and Sasha Roberts point out in their introduction to an anthology of female-authored Shakespearean scholarship and commentary that spans the period from the late seventeenth to the nineteenth century, 'both in England and America, women were to play a large part in the growing "youth market" for Shakespeare in the nineteenth century, preparing juvenile editions and numerous adaptations of Shakespeare's "tales", with the aim of introducing and popularising Shakespeare's plays'. While this may partly reflect a traditionally patriarchal division of

scholarly labour so that the production of child-centred or child-related materials falls within the purview of the woman's primary responsibility for homemaking and childrearing, female scholars also found opportunities to 'use their writing on Shakespeare to raise issues of particular concern to women', addressing 'subjects such as women's education, women's role in public life, and power relations between the sexes in society and in marriage'.[12] Viewed in this context, even Clarke's now notorious narrative elaborations in *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* (1850) – which in their own time were critically well received – deserve to be read not only as naïvely novelistic concoctions of a nonexistent subtext but as attempts to engage constructively a Shakespeare who, as she put it, 'has seen most deeply into the female heart ... has most vividly depicted it in its strength, and in its weakness'.[13]

In this respect, then, the convergence of intellectual enquiry, pedagogic intervention, creative appropriation, and social and political activism, which in the work of nineteenth-century women Shakespearean scholars manifests itself in materials both concerned with childhood and produced for children, provides an important (and only recently acknowledged) precursor of the project of late twentieth-century feminism, which is itself one of the shaping theoretical, critical and political contexts of this collection. Childhood, and its developmental relation to the construction of adult gender and sexual identities, has been an implicit concern of modern feminist scholarship since its moment of emergence in the early 1980s, in a variety of forms: in psychoanalytic criticism, which has anatomized and interrogated Shakespearean representations of masculinity and femininity by means of a Freudianism reread in the light of Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva and others;[14] in studies which have scrutinized the sexual ambiguity of the 'boy actress';[15] and, more recently, in a developing body of work which, as Catherine Belsey puts it, seeks 'to historicize and thus denaturalize family values' by investigating 'the story of the nuclear family ... from romance through marital conflict to parenthood and the relations between the children'.[16] The chapters in this collection build upon these areas of investigation, elaborating their established emphases on ideology, power and sexuality, through a focus on children and childhoods, both actual and imaginary, early modern and more recent. They respond to recent scholarship which reassesses performance by the young in Renaissance culture, and in royal and aristocratic households as well as the boy and adult companies. There is an equal attention to the current strong interest in manifestations of Shakespeare in popular, visual and media culture, from the eighteenth century to the present day, and in

a range of genres, from children's books and magazines, to theatrical memoirs, documentary and animated films, and tie-in Shakespeare products.

The volume's dual concern with the historical origins and contexts of Shakespearean childhoods and their continuing history of cultural reinvention is reflected in its two-part structure. The chapters in the first part, 'Shakespeare's children', all address, from various angles, the questions of what being a child might have meant, both to children, and to adult others, during this period, and of how these meanings were reflected, constructed and negotiated by children both as the subjects and the agents of fictional, theatrical and poetic representation. As Kate Chedgzoy points out in her introduction to part I, the marginality – bordering on invisibility – of early modern children in many existing accounts of Shakespeare's England and its drama needs to be drastically rethought in the light of 'evidence for early modern children's cultural presence and agency', including both the material artefacts they made and used and the work they performed, which is 'richer and more extensive' than has previously been thought (p. 28); the chapters that follow utilize that evidence, as well as the evidence of plays, poems and other literary and visual texts, to begin to recover the hidden history they trace. Reading the conventions for theatrically invoking childhood alongside the evolving techniques of children's portraiture during the early seventeenth century, Catherine Belsey examines the particularity of Shakespeare's own contribution to the emergence of a recognizably modern conception of the loving nuclear family, wherein childhood incrementally acquires 'a life of its own', having previously been 'barely visible ... as a distinctive state of being' (p. 33).

The idea that boundaries between childhood and adulthood are both porous and ambiguous in Shakespeare's works is also explored, from the standpoint of affective relations within the family, and between fathers and daughters in particular, in Hattie Fletcher and Marianne Novy's chapter, which identifies a recurrent trope of paternal loss that is both biographically and culturally resonant, in the context of a drama in which, 'for parents ... the relationship to their children is dramatized as crucial to their identity' (p. 49). In A. J. Piesse's chapter, which addresses the subject of Renaissance education, Shakespeare's children are discussed as textual constructs whose identities, and roles within both the historical narratives and the dramas they inhabit, are fashioned within the discourses of early modern pedagogy, in an examination of 'the dramatic significance of the relationship between school texts, texts of formation,