Chapter 1

‘A wentche, a gyrle, a Damsell’: Defining Early Modern Girlhood

Puella, a wenche.
Puellaris, re, chyldishe.
Puellascere, to wax yong again, to be maidenly.

Thomas Elyot, 1542

Puella, ae, foemini, gene. A wentche, a gyre, a Damsell.
Puellaris, re, chyldyshe, of gyrel, propre to girles and wentches.
Puellariter, lyke a wentche or gyre, chyldyshely.
Puellasco, scere, to waxe yonge againe, to bee maidenly, to waxe gyrlishe.
Puellula, ae, f.g.a. littell gyre, a wentche.

Thomas Cooper, 1548

When Thomas Cooper set about revising Thomas Elyot’s Latin-English dictionary *Bibliotheca Eliotae*, his aim was to ‘castigate’ and ‘augment’ the original to give ‘the true signification of wordes’.\(^1\) Among the words that Cooper castigated and augmented was the Latin noun *puella*, whose entry Cooper expanded to provide a fuller, if not a truer, set of English equivalents.\(^2\) Where Elyot had given the English translation for *puella* simply as ‘a wench’ in 1542, Cooper gave the entry six years later as ‘a wentche, a gyre, a Damsell’. This extension was part of Cooper’s overall attempt to give expanded translations for a number of Latin words, and the addition of ‘girl’ to entries related to *puella* was a consistent feature of Cooper’s revisionary activity. To Elyot’s entry for the Latin verb *puellascere*, ‘to wax yong again, to be maidenly’, Cooper added ‘to waxe gyrlishe’, once again giving the word ‘girl’ as an alternative for *puella*. In addition to inserting ‘girl’ into Elyot’s existing entries, Cooper supplemented the section of words related to *puella* with entries for *puellariter*, ‘lyke a wentche or gyre’, and *puellula*, ‘a littell gyre, a wentche’. At the same time, Cooper increased his dictionary’s emphasis on the gendering of the adjective *puellaris* by expanding Elyot’s entry of ‘chyldishe’ to read ‘chyldyshe, of gyrel, propre to girles
and wentches’. Rather than emphasising childhood in general, Cooper’s entry for *puellaris* defined the word specifically in relation to female childhood.

In the process of defining *puella* in more detailed and gender-specific terms, Cooper took part in a larger trend in sixteenth-century English. Although ‘girl’ had initially been used to refer to a child of either sex in Middle English, by the early sixteenth century ‘girl’ had come to refer exclusively to female individuals, a linguistic transformation that coincided with the beginning of a cultural redefinition of female youth. Appearing with increasing frequency in print and manuscript texts, ‘girl’ began a rise to prominence that would eventually establish it as the primary term for a female child in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Along the way, however, sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century definitions of ‘girl’ were slippery and contested. Writers and the culture to which and from which they were speaking were trying out a variety of words, and before ‘girl’ emerged as the dominant one, a number of others were circulating and competing for prominence. This chapter traces the shift from the sixteenth-century proliferation of synonyms for ‘girl’ to a time in the mid-seventeenth century when ‘girl’ and the other words in its semantic network began to be defined against each other as separate categories of female youth.

I argue that these lexical innovations were inseparable from the renegotiations of gender and age taking place in early modern society. As Stanley Cavell points out, names matter precisely because learning them teaches speakers to understand the social significances and ideologies behind them:

In learning language you learn not merely what the names of things are, but what a name is; not merely what the form of expression is for expressing a wish, but what expressing a wish is; not merely what the word for ‘father’ is, but what a father is; not merely what the word for ‘love’ is, but what love is. In learning language, you do not merely learn the pronunciation of sounds, and their grammatical orders, but the ‘forms of life’ which make those sounds the words they are, do what they do—e.g. name, call, point, express a wish or affection, indicate a choice or an aversion, etc.3

To learn to identify a ‘father’ entails not only learning to fit a sign to an object, but also the set of criteria that govern the communal customs for attaching the two together. A modern speaker knows that ‘damsel’ is a synonym for ‘girl’, but also understands that it is an inappropriate term for labelling identity in today’s world. At the same time, the speech act of calling someone a ‘damsel’ could potentially redefine the term and make a contemporary person into one.

As synchronic variations gave rise to diachronic changes in the
conventions governing speech, the cumulative speech acts of early modern speakers came to shape the imaginative possibilities for what it meant to be an early modern girl. ‘Girl’ evolved into a gender-specific term in the context of a vocabulary that was under construction. Among the words circulating in the rich and varied vocabulary of female youth were ‘girl’, ‘maid’, ‘wench’, ‘bird’, ‘lass’, ‘damsel’, ‘pucelle’, ‘daughter’, ‘trull’, ‘pigeon’, ‘tit’, ‘slut’, ‘miss’, ‘tendril’, ‘stammel’, ‘woman child’, ‘kitty’, ‘prill’, ‘tib’, ‘Gillian’, ‘mop’, ‘frotation’, ‘winklot’, ‘gixy’, ‘whims(e)y’, ‘zitella’, ‘vriester’ and ‘fraulen’.4 The plurality of terms was partly the result of English borrowings from other languages, making foreign-language dictionaries an important resource for investigating the development of this vocabulary. ‘Fraulen’ clearly derived from the German fräulein, the diminutive of frau, or wife, and ‘zitella’ was imported from early modern Italian. It is important to keep in mind, however, that although wide ranging, this list, compiled from Grzegorz Kleparski’s impressive study of synonyms for girl/young woman, can be a bit misleading for scholars interested specifically in female children. Many of the terms referred to both adult women and female children, and some only occur in a few texts. The most commonly used terms were ‘girl’, ‘maid’, ‘wench’ and ‘woman child’, though ‘lass’ and ‘damsel’ also appeared regularly. Given the scholarly emphasis on the organisation of early modern women’s life cycles into the categories of ‘maid’, ‘wife’ and ‘widow’, we might expect ‘maid’ to be the default term for ‘young female human being’ in early modern English, but this was not the case. Although the female category ‘maiden’ was arguably the most important category of female youth in medieval England, it no longer held such a dominant position in the sixteenth century.5

‘Girls’ could be grouped together with ‘maids’ as unmarried women, yet ‘girls’ could also be grouped with ‘whores’, since a sexually active ‘girl’ was not a ‘maid’. As soon as one criterion, such as age or marital status, had been established, the connection dissolved with the introduction of another criterion, such as virginity or behaviour. It would be a mistake to see stable boundaries between the terms because they were not sustained by early modern speakers. Instead, we need to pay attention to the way those boundaries were established at particular moments and the way they were dissolved at others. Words that signified one way in one context could signify differently in another. In Robert Herrick’s ‘Upon Jone and Jane’, for example, the title characters are both girls and wenches (and neither word is complimentary):

Ione is a wench that’s painted;
Ione is a Girle that’s tainted;
Yet Ione she goes
‘A wentche, a gyrle, a Damsell’

Like one of those
Whom purity had Sainted.

_Iane_ is a Girle that’s prittie;
_Iane_ is a wench that’s wittie;
Yet, who wo’d think,
Her breath do’s stinke,
And so it doth? that’s pittie.⁶

Herrick uses ‘wench’ and ‘girl’ interchangeably here to designate a woman of lower social standing who is ‘tainted’ through sexual activity. In contrast, when Titus says to Lavinia in Shakespeare’s _Titus Andronicus_ ‘Bear thou my hand, sweet wench, between thine arms’, ‘wench’ functions as a term of endearment and sign of fatherly authority (3.1.281). Much as with the use of the word ‘thou’, context is crucial; a father calling his daughter a ‘sweet wench’ suggests affection, whereas Herrick’s designation of a woman as ‘wench’ functions as mockery. This contrast can also be seen in _The Fair Maid of the West, Part I_. When Spencer calls his beloved Bess a ‘wench’, he does so affectionately (1.2.86); when the character Roughman tries to usurp Bess’s privileges as tavern owner and addresses her with the epithet ‘wench’, he is being rude (2.1.94).⁷ Distinctions based on age between ‘girls’ and ‘women’, as well as between ‘girls’ and ‘lasses’, ‘damsels’ and ‘maids’, are clearly relational and intertwined with other contextual factors, including social status, sexuality, familial ties, occupation and historical position.

In the context of this shifting semantic network, ‘girl’ emerged as a multifaceted category for describing aspects of the female life cycle that did not fit into a marital teleology. ‘Girl’ could define female individuals not only in relation to men, but also in relation to each other. When Celia in Shakespeare’s _As You Like It_ resolves not to allow Rosalind to suffer banishment alone, Celia explicitly denies her ties to her father the Duke, who has ordered Rosalind to leave the court. Chiding Rosalind for her passivity in the face of the Duke’s sentence, she describes their friendship in vivid language:

_Rosalind, lack’st thou then the love_
_Which teacheth thee that thou and I am one?_
_Shall we be sundered? Shall we part, sweet girl?_
_No. Let my father seek another heir._
_Therefore devise with me how we may fly,
_Whither to go, and what to bear with us._

(1.3.90–5)

Celia’s rhetorical move of calling Rosalind ‘sweet girl’ harkens back to a golden age of female friendship, a time before Rosalind’s desire for
Orlando separates the two female friends through heterosexual desire. Throwing off the demands of daughterly duty, Celia constructs a sense of female kinship, co-opting the traditional language of marriage and applying it to friendship. Instead of marriage, it is friendship that cannot be put asunder, and instead of husband and wife, two female characters are described as ‘one’. As Valerie Traub points out, Celia’s lines appropriate the Anglican marriage ceremony’s line ‘Those whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder’, thus reinterpreting its heterosexual valences in the service of same-sex erotic friendship. Celia invokes a time when she and Rosalind were inseparable, an image she used earlier when imploring the Duke to rethink Rosalind’s banishment. Celia pleads:

We still have slept together,
Rose at an instant, learned played, eat together,
And wheresoe’er we went, like Juno’s swans
Still we went coupled and inseparable.

(1.3.65–80)

Celia attempts to recapture and hold on to her friendship with Rosalind at a moment when it is doubly threatened by the Duke’s banishment and Rosalind’s newly kindled love for Orlando. The image of Celia and Rosalind as ‘Juno’s swans’, ‘coupled and inseparable’, evokes a powerful image of female friendship that Celia uses to produce a nostalgic narrative of growing up with Rosalind as her companion. Traub has noted that women evoke female unity only at moments of the dissolution of female bonds and suggests that erotic female love comes into view only in so far as it is lost. What I would emphasise is the extent to which the language of girlhood makes that legibility possible. Relegated to the past or surviving into the present, the discursive category of the ‘girl’ makes it possible for Celia to articulate her past bond with Rosalind at the same time that heterosexual love threatens to cleave them apart.

Even when used in the context of service, ‘girl’ could function as a marker of intimacy and affection between mistresses and servants, as in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*. Although focused on memorialising Antony, Cleopatra’s speeches following his death are often directed at her female serving women. Using ‘girls’ and ‘women’ interchangeably, Cleopatra designates her women as her ‘noble girls’:

How do you, women?
What, what, good cheer! Why, how now, Charmian?
My noble girls! Ah, women, women! Look,
Our lamp is spent, it’s out!

(4.16.84–7)
The choice of the word ‘girl’ here avoids the already over-determined term ‘noblewomen’, which designated aristocratic class status. Rather than indicating high social rank, ‘noble girls’ opens up the sense of the phrase, suggesting a nobility of behaviour and indicating Cleopatra’s respect for her women. In addition to constructing the relationship between Cleopatra and her ‘noble girls’ as affectionate, Cleopatra’s speech, with its insistent repetition of the word ‘women’, incorporates her servants into the royal ‘we’ that Cleopatra has used throughout the play. The presence of the plural ‘our lamp’ immediately following the repetition of ‘women’ blurs the distinction between the ‘our’ that Cleopatra would use as the ruler of Egypt and the ‘our’ that she would use to refer to herself and her serving women collectively.

In contrast, ‘maid’ was a term that described women in relationship to men. As a word that defined single women as servants or virgins (or both), ‘maid’ carried with it the social directive that all unmarried women should be virgins. If ‘maid’ was defined in opposition to ‘wife’, the word ‘girl’ was instead defined in opposition to ‘woman’, reorienting the maturation process. With ‘girl’, marriage was no longer the primary marker of the transition into adulthood. Unlike ‘maid’, with its connotations of virginity and service, ‘girl’ was available to designate female youth without always specifying sexual status or societal function. The differences between the two terms can be seen in Hester Pulter’s mid-seventeenth-century poem ‘Alithea’s Pearl’, which tells the story of how Alithea, or Truth, offered the speaker an ‘Orient Pearl’ if she parted ‘with all [she] had’ (lines 2–3). The exchange takes place when the speaker ‘was A Girle’ (line 1), and she gladly accepts and enters into a close relationship with the allegorical figure, who asks the child if she could love her. The speaker, ‘seeing her soe fare transcend all other’, assures the goddess that she would ‘Gladly live and Die’ with her and that their ‘Celestiall Love the true Loves knot did tie, / Reciprocally promiseing nere to depart’ (lines 7, 9–10). As with Rosalind and Celia, this language of erotic female friendship also echoes the conventions of heterosexual love language, from the speaker pledging to exchange all her worldly goods to her promise never to be parted from the goddess. They even seal their pledge of love with a kiss: ‘She took possession of my virgin Heart, / In earnest of her love shee gave a kiss’ (lines 12–13). This utopic vision of girlish love is disrupted, however, when Alithea reads the book of fate and reveals to the speaker that she has a future as a wife and mother. The goddess sees that ‘both Infant, Maid & Wife / Would bee involv’d’ and that the speaker will be ‘fild with inward trouble’ (lines 42–3). In contrast to that predicted future, which includes ‘a tedious Pilgrimage’ (line 46), the speaker’s girlhood gets characterised as a time of innocence,
rooted in an all-female community. In the rest of the poem, the speaker asks Alithea for a visit from Peace and Joy but is warned they rarely stay long; offered Patience and Hope in their stead, the speaker rejects them and learns the hard way when she wakes up to find that her visitors have fled. The speaker’s yearning for Peace comes across as a desire to remain in a homoerotic safe space; when she asks that Alithea invite Peace ‘To dwell with [them] in consummate delight’ (line 26), the sexualised language of consummation suggests a connection between safety, joy (with Joy being figured as Peace’s daughter) and homosocial spaces. The entrance into heterosexuality, on the other hand, leads to pain and weariness that requires Patience to survive. As the poem concludes, Pulter declares, ‘Thus have I liv’d a sad and weary life, / Thirteen a Mayd, and Thirtie three a Wife. / All I found true my Alithea did speak, / But yet (Aye mee) the bubble will not breake’ (162–5). Having begun with a story about her girlhood with Alithea, she redefines herself as a maid and wife after she is forced to accept her heterosexual future.

‘Girl’, unlike ‘maid’, was a term that enabled early modern texts to acknowledge the roles of female characters in liminal social and sexual positions. In Romeo and Juliet, in the scene that immediately follows the implied consummation of Juliet’s marriage to Romeo, Juliet is repeatedly called a ‘girl’. Romeo’s departure from the balcony at the beginning of the scene dramatises the consummation, making it clear that the two characters have spent the night together. The audience knows that Juliet is no longer a ‘maid’, though her parents do not. When Lady Capulet enters to see if her daughter is awake, her language accommodates Juliet’s new liminal status, reflecting the parents’ view of their daughter as their little ‘girl’ and the audience’s knowledge that she has become a wife. Instead of calling her ‘maid’, which would linguistically undo the dramatic opening of the scene through which Juliet’s new sexual status has been made known to the audience, Lady Capulet calls Juliet a ‘girl’ when consoling her over Tybalt’s death, which Lady Capulet believes to be the cause of her daughter’s distress: ‘Well, girl, thou weep’st not so much for his death / As that the villain lives which slaughtered him’ (3.5.77–8). As the conversation continues and Juliet equivocates about her feelings for Romeo, her mother once again calls her a ‘girl’ while attempting to cheer her up with news of Juliet’s impending marriage to Paris: ‘But now I’ll tell thee joyful tidings, girl’ (3.5.104). When Juliet’s father enters later in the scene, he does the same (3.5.129). The play’s language thereby avoids allowing the words of Juliet’s parents to undermine the dramatic force of the scene’s opening and prevents any potential audience confusion caused by the language of the characters. The language of girlhood provided a viable way to designate the place
of female characters outside the traditional ‘maid, wife, widow’ schema. Juliet can be a ‘girl’ and still be sexually active.

In contrast to Act 3, Scene 5, Lady Capulet couches Juliet’s status in terms of maidenhood the first time that she proposes that Juliet marry in Act 1. Her claim that by her count she was a mother at Juliet’s age involves the statement that Juliet is a ‘maid’ (1.3.75). In fact, prior to the consummation of Romeo and Juliet’s marriage, the only character to call Juliet a ‘girl’ rather than a ‘maid’ is the Nurse, and she does so in the context of a series of affectionate (and diminutive) nicknames. Calling Juliet on behalf of Lady Capulet, the Nurse addresses her as ‘lamb’ and ‘ladybird’ before asking with exasperation, ‘where is this girl?’ (1.3.3–4). The Nurse’s ‘girling’ of Juliet seems related to her acute awareness of Juliet’s not-so-distant infancy. For the Nurse, however, Juliet’s virginity is and always has been temporary, so it is not surprising that she views her charge as existing in a liminal sexual state. Immediately prior to calling Juliet a ‘girl’, the Nurse swears by her own ‘maidenhead at twelve year old’ (1.3.2). The Norton editors suggest that this is ‘[p]resumably the latest date that the Nurse could swear by her virginity’, but of course it will also be the last date by which Juliet can swear by her virginity. Indeed, the subsequent bawdy tale of Juliet falling on her face and the Nurse’s husband joking that it presages a time when she will fall backward in sexual union speaks to the way that young maidens in the play always already seem destined to stop being maids. Even in the opening scene, Samson and Gregory begin by talking about ‘maids’ as servants and then proceed to redefine the women of the house of Montague in sexual, rather than social, terms. After declaring that once he’s fought with the Montague men he’ll be ‘civil with the maids’ and ‘cut off their heads’, Samson makes the sexual pun explicit: ‘Ay, the heads of the maids, or their maidenheads, take it in what sense thou wilt’ (1.1.19–20, 22–3). Juliet invokes a similarly morbid understanding of her maidenhood when she learns of Romeo’s banishment, fearing that as ‘a maid’, she will ‘die maiden-widowed’, lamenting that ‘death, not Romeo’ shall take her ‘maidenhead’ (3.2.135, 137). Although ‘maid’ did not always have such negative connotations – Romeo calls Juliet a ‘fair maid’ as a term of affection (2.1.103) – its various meanings are over-determined compared to the flexibility of ‘girl’.

As ‘girl’ became more dominant, however, it was eventually incorporated into a linear narrative of women’s lives. The explosion of terms
in English for ‘girl’ in the sixteenth century followed the developmental pattern for vernacular vocabularies that Juliet Fleming traces in her study of early monolingual English dictionaries, one that would result in ‘girl’ being carefully defined against the other terms in its semantic network and the predominant definition of ‘girl’ coming to be a female child. Using John E. Joseph’s structural model for the two phases involved in the development of vernacular languages, Fleming argues that the sixteenth century in England was a time of elaboration in the early English lexicon aimed at correcting its ‘inadequacy’ and making it a suitable replacement for Latin as the official language of the state. In the seventeenth century, however, a restrictive phase of standardisation followed in which regulations were introduced to control what was perceived as an unruly and unconstrained elaborative process that needed rules to create standards. This process explains how girls became what we think of as girls today.

The lexical history of the term ‘girl’ bears out Fleming’s analysis in a narrative that also corresponds to the linear narrative that Michel Foucault describes in The Order of Things, which provides a useful framework for understanding these diachronic changes. According to Foucault, the early modern world in the sixteenth century interpreted signs according to similitude, seeing correspondences between categories that created a sense of abundance and copia. By the seventeenth century, however, he locates a shift in the way of organising the world that interpreted words and things according to differences. Order is established, he argues, not by discovering resemblances, but by scrupulously categorising difference, a shift that leads to the eighteenth-century taxonomical impulse. As in Foucault’s historical narrative, the story of ‘girl’ and its semantic network goes from similitude to difference, from interchangeable categories to mutually exclusive definitions. The innovations taking place in the vocabulary of female youth in the sixteenth century were in part the effect of a sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century lexicographical project. However, in the case of ‘girl’, I would argue that the general push to fashion the English language into a vernacular replacement for Latin worked in concert with an interconnected shift in cultural constructions of gender and youth.

The general changes taking place in the way that early modern society produced knowledge had particular effects on the way that early modern English speakers constructed gender differences in language, a shift that can be traced in early modern dictionaries. At the beginning of the sixteenth century and through most of the early modern period, what characterised the language of early modern female youth was multiplicity. The compilers of early English dictionaries were seeking to capture the
wide-ranging vocabulary of early modern English, and their word lists acted as a kind of archive of the actual words being used by speakers and writers. One reason ‘girl’ would initially have been interchangeable with its synonyms was a function of the literary medium in which it appeared. Early modern dictionaries provided English alternatives for foreign words, not fixed lexical definitions of English ones. Dictionaries that provided explanations in English of a comprehensive list of English words did not yet exist; the only monolingual dictionaries in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were ‘hard word’ dictionaries that excluded everyday words. With one or two exceptions, most of the dictionaries in which ‘girl’ appeared were foreign-language ones that translated between English and French, Latin, Italian or Spanish.14

This blurring of lexical boundaries was in keeping with early modern linguistic praxis. ‘Maid’, for example, was sometimes used to indicate female children, but it was less frequently used than ‘wench’ and often was left out of dictionary entries when the primary connotation of the foreign word was ‘female child’ rather than ‘female virgin’ or ‘female servant’. Only the beginnings of a separation between the terms can be traced. Giovanni Torriano’s Vocabulario Italiano e Inglese (1659) takes the entry for carósa from John Florio’s A Worlde of Wordes, or Most Copious, Dictionarie in Italian and English (1598) and adapts it so that it gestures toward a differentiation between ‘girls’ and ‘maids’. Where Florio defines carósa as ‘a yoong maide, a lasse, a girle, a wench, a maiden servaut’, Torriano deletes ‘a yoong maide’ and ‘maiden servaut’ and instead gives the entry as ‘a wench, a lasse, a girle’.16 His removal of ‘maid’ may suggest a desire to de-emphasise service and virginity and play up the Italian word’s connotations of female youth. The entrance of ‘girl’ into English and its increasing prominence can be seen, but its establishment as the dominant term for a female child happens gradually and, along the way, these texts present the terms as generally interchangeable. The link between service and virginity most likely reflects the requirement that apprentices be unmarried and the social custom that resulted in most girls going into some form of service. Most young women, even at the upper levels of society, would have been sent away from the parental home in their teens, in some cases as apprentices, but more often as domestic servants.17 Because of a statute from 1567, unmarried women of the lower classes between the ages of fourteen and forty could be pressed into service, and even aristocratic young ladies, who would have been exempt from the statute, would most likely have been sent out to be ladies-in-waiting in other aristocratic households.18 As such, it makes sense for service, youth and singlehood to have been linked together both conceptually and linguistically. Ilana
Krausman Ben-Amos rightly cautions against modern historians conflating dependency with immaturity such that we describe twenty-one-year-old apprentices as if they were socially and emotionally equal to children of twelve or thirteen; if masters were imagined to function as parental substitutes, the metaphor need not be understood to do away with all distinctions between subordinate social positions. Nevertheless, it is the case that the early modern vocabulary of youth did see affinities between the positions of servants (who typically entered service while relatively young) and children (who were by definition young).

The distinctions between English words sharpened, however, in the earliest monolingual dictionaries that focused on common English words, and differentiation brought with it the opportunity for lexicographers to be more explicit about the connotations involved in using the words ‘girl’ and ‘maid’. In *A New English Dictionary Shewing the Etymological Derivation of the English Tongue* (1691), the word ‘maid’ was etymologically distinguished from ‘girl’ and explicitly linked to virginity: ‘A Maid, from the AS. Maeyden, the Belg. Maeght, Maegho, or the Teut. Magh, *idem*, a Virgin. Hence the AS. Maden-hade, a Maidenhead, or Virginity.’ ‘Girl’, on the other hand, was a common enough word to require no explanation. Skipping the literal definition, the dictionary goes straight to describing gendered behaviour as the source of the word’s meaning. The compiler explains its supposed etymology, claiming, ‘Minshew draws it from the Lat. *Garrula*, because they are given to prating. It may also be drawn from the Ital. *Givella*, a weather-cock; which comes à *Gyrando*, from turning round; thereby denoting their inconstancy.’ The move to differentiate ‘girl’ from and within its semantic network was co-extensive with its association with negative aspects of femininity, a point to which I will return when I discuss John Palsgrave’s 1530 French-English dictionary, which provides the earliest recorded use of the term ‘girl’ to mean a female child rather than a child of either sex. Although ‘girls’ might be expected to be ‘maids’, the possibility that they might be prating and inconstant calls into question the exchangeability of the two terms.

By the time that Samuel Johnson compiled his groundbreaking dictionary in the eighteenth century, ‘girl’ and its semantic network had undergone a transformation, and the word ‘girl’ had officially been established as the default term for a female child. With Johnson, we have a dictionary that defined both hard and common English words and that attempted to define words specifically and precisely. The vocabulary of girlhood was accordingly less profuse and more defined. A ‘girl’ in Johnson’s dictionary was not a ‘maid’ or a ‘damsel’ or a ‘lass’ or a ‘wench’, but simply a ‘young woman, or a female child’.
No other alternatives were given. The principal definition of ‘boy’ was likewise relatively stripped down, being defined as ‘a male child, not a girl’. Interestingly, Johnson defines boys by what they are not, namely girls; in contrast, girls are simply young women or female children, thus inverting the adult binary through which women are often defined as ‘not men’. The implication is that girls are the standard against which categories of children are defined. The prominence of ‘girl’ within the eighteenth-century lexicon also appears clearly in Johnson’s definitions of potential synonyms for young women. Although other alternatives are given, ‘girl’ is the first term in the definition for ‘lass’, which is ‘A girl; a maid; a young woman: used now only of mean girls’. Beginning with ‘girl’ as a definition, Johnson then defined the eighteenth-century ‘lass’ as a particular type of girl – one who was lower class. Johnson’s combined entry for ‘maid’ and ‘maiden’ likewise did not explicitly connect maidenhood with youth. A ‘maid/maiden’ for Johnson was ‘an unmarried woman, a virgin’, as well as a ‘female servant’. The association of ‘maid’ with female children remained only in Johnson’s dictionary when ‘maid’ modified the term ‘child’ in a quotation from Leviticus under his third definition, where ‘maid’ indicated femaleness in general. ‘Maid’ was no longer automatically associated with children, but with sexual purity and, hence in the case of ‘maidhood’, ‘freedom from contamination’. The lexical effect of Johnson’s dictionary was to pare down and precisely define the vocabulary of female youth.

II

The increased visibility of the word ‘girl’ was not merely a generic effect of the transition to monolingual dictionaries. Over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the term ‘girl’ appeared with increasing frequency and occupied an even more prominent role in a wide variety of genres, becoming more closely associated with female childhood along the way. Having examined the increasing prominence of ‘girl’ in early modern dictionaries, I now want to show that the establishment of ‘girl’ as the dominant term for a female child coincided with the incorporation of the category of the ‘girl’ into a linear model of the female life cycle. This incorporation, I suggest, made ‘girl’ less serviceable for describing female identities that fell outside prescriptive patriarchal roles because girlhood would become simply an earlier step in the progression that would lead inevitably to marriage.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the terms that were to become specific to female children were only just emerging. When
The Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Sisters

writers wanted to distinguish between female children and male children, the most common method was to use the phrases ‘woman child’ and ‘man child’. Designating the biological sex of infants was achieved predominantly through the addition of the qualifiers ‘woman’ and ‘man’, and the use of these adult terms, rather than terms that were specific to childhood, located sexual difference in the adult world. This particular formulation placed female children and adult women, as well as male children and adult men, into bifurcated sex-gender categories. On the one side were women and women children; on the other were men and men children. ‘Boy’ existed as a specialised term for male children as far back as the Middle Ages, but with no dominant corresponding term for female children, it was not yet frequently used when male and female children were being defined against each other. The differences between men children and women children were essentially future differences that would manifest in adulthood; the labels for them were markers of their future place in the adult sex-gender hierarchy.

As a number of scholars have argued, male and female children were relatively undifferentiated before the age of seven, when breaching ceremonies began the initiation of boys into masculine culture and separated them from their female caretakers. Although the extent of their separation varied with their class, breaching was a custom that appears to have taken place at all levels of society. Prior to this cultural production of sexual difference, the sex of a child was less socially marked. In fact, because children of both sexes were socially disadvantaged within early English power relations, they were all, like women in general, subordinated to adult men. That is not to say that all children were gendered female, but that all children, including boys who had been breeched, were subordinate to adult men. In relation to the word ‘child’, the word ‘boy’ functioned as what Roman Jakobson has called a marked term. According to Jakobson’s structuralist linguistic theory, binaries normally employ marked and unmarked terms, where the default or naturalised term is ‘unmarked’ and the other term is ‘marked’ as different. The most obvious example of such a tendency is the use of ‘man’ as a universal term. ‘Man’ can indicate humanity in general or a male human being, whereas ‘woman’ is always particular, only referring to a female human being. In so far as words reveal a culture’s underlying biases, Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley have suggested that a study of modern English vocabulary reveals that ‘the male is associated with the universal, the general, the subsuming; the female is more often excluded or is the special case’. This was already true in early modern English, although an interesting reversal of this tendency for female terms to be marked occurs with the term ‘midwife’. Men who began practising mid-
wifery were entering into a field perceived as female and were accordingly called man-midwives, the qualifier ‘man’ marking them as different from the usual practitioner. 

As in the case of midwives, the default sex of children was reversed. If ‘child’ was the universal term, ‘boy’ was the special term, functioning as a linguistic device that enabled male children to pass into a liminal stage between the female world of childhood and adult manhood (though boys were very carefully defined in opposition to men in order to police the bounds of masculinity). Although ‘boy’ had multiple synonyms, such as ‘lad’ and ‘stripling’, ‘boy’ was quickly established as the primary term for a male child while ‘girl’ was still emerging. Whatever the historical situation of actual girls and boys in early modern England, the important point to note in terms of language is that writers and speakers of early modern English did not define childhood as specifically male, nor does ‘boy’ become the default term for ‘child’. In fact, when the umbrella term ‘child’ was gendered, it was gendered female, as in the well-known textual crux from *The Winter’s Tale*. Having spotted the abandoned infant Perdita on the Bohemian seacoast, the Old Shepherd exclaims, ‘Mercy on’s, a bairn! A very pretty bairn. A boy or a child, I wonder?’ (3.3.67–8), a statement to which I will return in Chapter 3.

The waning association of childhood with the feminine is reflected not in the development of ‘boy’ as a specialised term for a male child but in the development of specialised terms for female children. It reflected a growing sense of the need for language to mark more clearly the biological sex of female children, and ‘girl’ was only one of the English words for children in general that went from being gender neutral to gender specific during the period. ‘Maid’, which in Middle English could indicate a virgin of either sex or a female servant, was by the seventeenth century becoming increasingly gendered female. That early modern people were aware of this transition is evident from Sebastian’s quip in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* that Olivia has ‘been betrothed both to a maid and a man’ (5.1.256). The ‘maid/man’ is Sebastian, who is playing with the ability of the word ‘maid’ to refer both to himself as a male virgin and to his twin sister Viola. Sebastian’s wit depends upon the juxtaposition of both definitions, calling attention to the substitution of Sebastian for Viola. The humour depends upon the multiple meanings of ‘maid’, and modern readers often miss the joke because our own definition of maidenhood is so gender specific.

As ‘girl’ and ‘boy’ became the default terms for female and male children, childhood was increasingly represented as encompassing boyhood and girlhood, two separate kinds of childhood with different gender expectations. The earliest recorded use of ‘girl’ definitely to mean a
female child rather than a child of either sex comes from John Palsgrave’s *Lesclarcissement de la langue francoyse* (1530), which defines *garçon*, a boy, against *garçe*, a girl. That the earliest known source is a dictionary should not be surprising, since it is difficult outside of a definitional context to determine whether ‘girl’ was being used in a gender-specific context. In Middle English, as previously noted, a ‘girl’ could be either a male or female child, unless modified by the terms ‘knave’ or ‘gay’ to signal a male or female respectively. The unisex nature of the term can be ambiguous in some texts, but an example can be found in the B version of *Piers Plowman* when Dame Study boasts that she taught Plato and Aristotle and wrote the first ‘Grammer for girles’ (10.176). It is unlikely that the allegorical figure means that she wrote a grammar book for female children; if anything, she would be much more likely to be referring to male children, and as recorded by the *Middle English Dictionary*, the word ‘childeryn’ appears as a variant for ‘girles’ in several of the manuscripts. The date that ‘girl’ became gender specific has been up for debate, but most experts like Grzegorz Kleparski and Anne Curzan locate the transition somewhere after Chaucer and before Palsgrave. That is not to say that writers never referred to a female child as a ‘girl’ prior to 1530, just that the gendering of the term remains ambiguous. As Curzan has argued, the unmodified use of ‘girl’ in *Pearl* (c. 1375–1450) does not set the word in opposition to ‘boy’, so we cannot know if it is female specific, and Chaucer’s references to ‘som gay gerl’ in *The Miller’s Tale* proves likewise unrevealing because the modifier ‘gay’ marks the term as female without telling us whether the term itself had become female. Curzan also suggests that the ‘yonge gerles of the diocese’ mentioned in Chaucer’s *General Prologue* could easily refer to children of both sexes, and, indeed, although the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists *Pearl* as the earliest occurrence of ‘girl’ to mean a female child, it places the young girls of the diocese under definition 1, ‘a child of either sex’. It is possible that a Middle English manuscript will be found in which ‘girl’ (as opposed to ‘gay girl’) will be set in opposition to ‘boy’, but until we can find an earlier source that pits ‘girl’ against another term, Palsgrave’s dictionary stands as the earliest recorded use of the word to mean a female child, though it is worth noting that ‘girl’ as a designation for a specifically female child must already have been well established for it to make its way into Palsgrave’s dictionary.

Not only does ‘girl’ appear in Palsgrave’s chart of substantives, the word ‘girl’ gets placed in opposition to ‘boy’ in his section explaining how to transform masculine words into feminine words by changing the endings, such as transforming *garçon* into *garçe*. Palsgrave was highly concerned with the gender of French nouns, an interest that led him to
associate the gender of words with gendered behaviour. Under the entry for the verb ‘bolden’, for example, Palsgrave gave the French translation for the English sentence ‘It is good to bolden a boye in his youth / and to acustome a gyrl to be shame faste’ as ‘Il fayt bon danimer, or déhardyr vng garçon en sa ieunesse, et daccoustumer vne garce destre vergogneuse’. Palsgrave’s interest in the gender of words had its ideological counterpart in the sayings that he chose to translate from French into English; he associated the grammatical gender differences between ‘boy’ and ‘girl’, or garçon and garçe, with gendered behaviour. Changing the ending of garçon and turning it into garçe required a parallel change in the way boys and girls were raised, or so Palsgrave’s example suggested. By adding extra terms and by marking nouns as feminine and masculine, Palsgrave blurs the line between language and gender identity.

As ‘girl’ became more and more defined as the opposite of ‘boy’, rather than an ever-shifting signifier for multiple female roles, it was eventually incorporated into a linear narrative of women’s lives. Women’s lives began to be more widely represented in the seventeenth century as being divisible into discrete stages, just as attempts to draw sharper distinctions between the lexical terms for ‘young female human beings’ became more common. Unlike the ‘Ages of Man’, of which Jacques’s speech in As You Like It is perhaps the best-known example, the ‘Ages of Woman’ prior to the mid to late seventeenth century was ‘not a widespread cultural topos’, in the words of Hanna Scolnicov. This lack in the literary record may well be attributable to the fact that women’s life cycles were not conceived of as organised in such a clearly demarcated way. As I discussed in the introduction, female children were differentiated from adult women, but their progress into adulthood was imagined as continuous rather than marked by a break. The blurry, indeterminate line between female childhood and adulthood sharpened, however, as it became more common to imagine women’s lives as also consisting of a set of mutually exclusive stages.

Whereas before mid-century ‘girl’, ‘maid’ and the other words in their semantic network were generally used interchangeably, by the end of the century attempts to categorise women’s lives taxonomically became more widespread. This formulation of women’s life cycles is most clearly articulated in John Amos Comenius’s Orbis Sensualium Pictus (1659). The purpose of this emblem book was to help schoolboys learn Latin, and it consisted of emblems illustrating Latin poems and their English translations. Adding women to his representation of the ‘seven ages’, Comenius places figures illustrating each age on a set of ascending and descending stairs that correspond to the stages of growing up and growing old. To explain the picture, Comenius writes:
Illustration of the ‘Seven Stages of Man’, from John Amos Comenius’s Orbis Sensualium Pictus (London, 1659). Courtesy of the Folger Shakespeare Library.
A man is first an Infant, then a Boy, then a Youth, then a Young-man, then a Man, after that, an Elderly-man and at last, a decrepid old Man. So also in the other Sex, there are, a Girle, A Damosel, A Maid, A Woman, an Elderly Woman, and a decrepid old Woman.  

Unlike the early foreign-language dictionaries, a ‘girl’ in this formulation is neither a ‘damsel’ nor a ‘maid’ but as distinct from them as from ‘boy’. Infancy, interestingly enough, is the only life stage during which no gender distinction is present in the woodcut, illustrated as it is by a single swaddled child, but after the uniquely gendered time of infancy (to which I will return in Chapter 3), life consists of boyhood and girlhood as separate masculine and feminine stages.

At stake in the emergence of these multiple terms were competing definitions of female youth. What it meant to be a ‘girl’ or ‘maid’ or ‘wench’ or ‘damsel’ was very much up in the air, and although these terms were not necessarily defined against each other, they did have patterns of usage that reflected the speaker’s assumptions about female children and adult women. Word choice could define female youth by age, sexual and/or marital status, behaviour, class or any combination of these. Children as a group were closely associated with servants as subordinated groups, so it is not surprising that many of the words for children also doubled as words for adult servants. In that sense, late medieval and early modern constructions of childhood often defined it more as a power relation than as a time of life. As childhood became more associated with age and less with service, however, the words that had once doubled for servants began to be separated out and no longer applied to children, as did words that explicitly defined female children by their sexual status (whether positively or negatively).

‘Wench’ is a perfect example of a term with connotations that eventually led speakers to stop using it as a synonym for ‘child’. After ‘wench’ became a word for female children and lower-class women, it metamorphosed from a ‘socially pejorative’ term (i.e. female servant) into a ‘morally pejorative’ term (i.e. wanton woman).  

As a linguistic category, ‘wench’ in early modern English was exceptionally polysemous, defined as it was by age, class, social function and behaviour. The eventual elimination of the term ‘wench’ as a label for female children can most likely be attributed to the conversion of its lower-class associations into associations with wanton behaviour, and its earlier metamorphosis into a general term for female children was indicative of the association between being female and being socially subordinate. ‘Wench’ came to be a derogatory term in a way that ‘girl’ functioned much less frequently. When Mercutio says Romeo has been ‘stabbed with a white wench’s black eye’, he clearly does not mean to be complimentary.
The pejoration of ‘wench’ was part of a general semantic derogation that Muriel R. Schulz has uncovered in the English language. ‘Again and again’, she writes, ‘one finds that a perfectly innocent term designating a girl or a woman may begin with totally neutral or even positive connotations, but that gradually it acquires negative implications, at first perhaps only slightly disparaging, but after a period of time becoming abusive and ending in a sexual slur.’ Other than its gender associations, it is not entirely clear why ‘wench’ underwent this process of semantic derogation at this particular moment, but as it became more negative, it was applied less frequently to children.

If ‘wench’ was a term initially applied to children of all social classes that later came to designate only lower-class women, ‘damsel’ was an aristocratic term that gradually came to be applied to women more generally. Derived from the diminutive of *dame*, the female equivalent of *dominus* or lord, ‘damsel’ referred predominantly to aristocratic women in later Middle English. ‘Damsel’ is anomalous, however, in that it was used in the twelfth century as a term for a serving woman, overlapping with the Middle English words ‘maid’, ‘maiden’ and ‘wench’. Why a word etymologically linked to aristocratic titles should have begun as a designation for a servant is a mystery, but it may be related to the previously mentioned custom of sending children of the gentry and the aristocracy into service in other wealthy households. ‘Damsel’ did not acquire its aristocratic associations until the fourteenth century, and then it did so through its centrality to Romance, which contributed to making it a prominent word in Middle English. By the late sixteenth century, however, ‘damsel’ was no longer a term of everyday parlance but was instead specific to poetry and Romance.

The reason that ‘damsel’ was somewhat peripheral in the early modern vocabulary of female youth was that ‘damsel’ gradually acquired an archaic and poetical sense. It is not surprising, for example, that ‘damsel’ would come out of the mouth of the unctuous Neatfoot in the opening of *The Roaring Girl*. Greeting Mary Fitzallard, Neatfoot says, ‘The young gentleman, our young master, Sir Alexander’s son – it is into his ears, sweet damsel, emblem of fragility, you desire to have a message transported, or to be transcendent?’ (1.1.1–4). Neatfoot’s obsequious language links ‘sweet damsel’ with the over-the-top ‘emblem of fragility’, and his elaborate and tortured sentence structure is as laboured as his addressing of Mary as ‘your chastity’. Since Neatfoot believes that Mary is involved in an illicit affair with his master, his *politesse* is about as sincere as his polite addressing of Mary as ‘damsel’. That said, ‘damsel’ was not always an insincere form of respectful address. ‘Damsel’ also appeared a great deal in poetry; writers drawing...
on a Middle English poetic tradition often used ‘damsel’ sincerely. As a result, ‘damsels’, rather than ‘girls’, dominate Edmund Spenser’s *The Fairie Queene*, which is both an aristocratic poem and a consciously archaic one.

That said, although ‘damsel’ had a fairly rigid definition, it could, when co-opted in the service of different genres, carry slightly different connotations. John Harington’s ‘The Author to a Daughter of nine yeere old’ (1618) is an epigram where the aristocratic associations disappear when the term gets exported from Romance. Harington transplants ‘damsels’ from the world of fairies and knights to the household, where daughters are asking fathers for costly items. He writes:

> Though pride in Damsels is a hatefull vice,  
> Yet could I like a Noble-minded Girle,  
> That would demand me things of costly price,  
> Rich Velvet gownes, pendants, and chains of Pearle  
> Carknets of Aggats, cut with rare deuice,  
> Not that hereby she should my minde entice  
> To buy such things against both wit and profit,  
> But I like well she should be worthy of it.40

In this poem, Harington distinguishes between ‘Damsels’, who should be humble, and ‘Noble-minded’ girls, who are worthy of spoiling with riches. Given that the daughter is nine years old, Harington may be differentiating between ‘damsels’, mature young women who should have learned humility and who are sexually mature, and ‘girls’, who are primarily defined by their status as daughters and who, in that capacity, usurp the nobility and class associations of damsels in the Romance genre.

In the end, ‘girl’ would win out over terms like ‘maid’ and ‘damsel’ and become the dominant counterpart for ‘boy’. Tracing the evolution of terms for female children in midwifery manuals provides a striking illustration of this process because the medical concern over how to guess the sex of an unborn child provides moments when female and male infants were set in opposition to each other in similar texts over the course of a century. In contrast, the sex of actual children in parish record books was not always noted. Moreover, because of the emphasis on biological processes in medical discourse, it is possible to know the relative ages of the ‘girls’ discussed in midwifery manuals, whereas the age of children mentioned in other discourses are frequently indeterminate.

In arguably the earliest midwifery manual published in England, Richard Jonas’s translation of Eucharius Rösslin’s *The Byrth of Mankynde* (1540), male and female infants, as well as older children, are referred
to by the terms ‘man child’ and ‘woman child’. In fact, they are even occasionally called simply ‘man’ and ‘woman’, as when Jonas writes:

But if ye be desirous to knowe whether the conception be man or woman: then lete a droppe of her [the mother’s] mylke or twayne be mylken on a smothe glass / or a bryght knife / other elles on the nayle of one of her fingers / and yf the mylke flewe and spredde abrode vpon it / by and by then is it a woman chylde: but yf the droppe of mylke continue and stande styll vppon that / the which it is milked on / then is it sygne of a man chylde.

When Thomas Raynald (Jonas’s publisher) reprinted Jonas’s translation in 1552, he did use the word ‘boy’, but not as a term for a male infant. The word ‘boy’ occurs instead at a moment when boys were not being placed in contradistinction to female children. Replacing Jonas’s dedication to Queen Katherine with ‘A prologue to the women readers’, Raynald sought to assuage the fear that ‘every boye and knaue had of these Bokes, reading them as openly as the tales of Robin hood’. The boys who might abuse The Womans Book are much older than the men children referenced in the text of the manual itself. Male infants in this text remain ‘men children’.

‘Man child’ and ‘woman child’ would persist into the early seventeenth century, but translators also started to mix in other terms. The competition that ‘girl’ faced as the replacement for ‘woman child’ can be seen in the translation of Jacques Guillemeau’s 1612 midwifery manual, Child-birth, or The Happy Deliverie of Women. Guillemeau’s translator consistently uses the word ‘wench’ in lieu of ‘girl’, titling the second chapter ‘The signes whereby to know whether a woman be with child of a boy or a wench’. Female infants throughout this section are ‘wenches’, and male children are consistently ‘boys’. That this boy/wench dichotomy was not just a quirk of Guillemeau’s is evident from Charmian’s question to the soothsayer in Antony and Cleopatra, when she asks, ‘Prithee, how many boys and wenches must I have’ (1.2.32). Most of the time Guillemeau’s translator simply calls the child ‘the child’, with no indication of biological sex, but when he wants to be specific, ‘wench’ is his primary term, and he employs it exclusively as a gendered term that denotes infancy.

Although ‘wench’ had its place in the lexicon, ‘girl’ would prove to be far more popular in the mid-seventeenth century. The English translation of The Workes of that famous Chirurgion Ambroise Parey uses both formulations for sexual difference, alternating ‘man child’ with ‘boy’ and ‘woman child’ with ‘girl’. Claiming that the quantity of ‘seed’ taken from each parent determines the sex of the child, Paré writes that if in the mixture of seed
mans seed for quality and quantity exceed the woman's, it will be a man child [not] a woman child, although that in either of the kindes, there is both the mans and woman's seeds, as you may see from the experience of those men who by their first wives have had boyes onely and by their second wives had girles onely.

By making these two sets of terms synonymous, Paré illustrates the interchangeability that would enable the gradual substitution of ‘girl’ and ‘boy’ for ‘woman child’ and ‘man child’. By the time Nicholas Culpeper and Jane Sharp wrote their midwifery manuals in English in 1651 and 1671, ‘woman child’ and ‘man child’ had disappeared completely, and both relied on ‘boy’ and ‘girl’ to designate sexual differences between infants at birth. It is worth noting, however, that ‘boy’ never became an unmarked term for children, and that when ‘boy’ and ‘girl’ appeared as a pair, they were rarely hierarchical. When Cleopatra laments ‘Young boys and girls / Are now level with men’ (4.16.67–8), she figures them as occupying the same level in the social hierarchy. Both are clearly perceived as being of a lower status than men, but girls are no lower than boys. Likewise, when Paulina criticises Leontes in *The Winter’s Tale*, she describes his jealousy as ‘Fancies too weak for boys, too green and idle / For girls of nine’ (3.2.179–80). Using children of both sexes as markers of immaturity and unmanliness, Paulina implies that Leontes’s behaviour is below the level that would be expected of children of either sex. ‘Boy’ and ‘girl’ did not have the same hierarchical relationship as ‘man’ and ‘woman’ because the two terms indicated mutual positions of disempowerment.

As ‘girl’ became a more prominent term, however, it ceased to be so easily interchangeable with ‘maid’, and consequently it came to be used more often to indicate the youth of a female human being rather than her liminal gender position. In the midwifery manuals of the seventeenth century, ‘girls’ came to be described as younger versions of ‘maids’, a categorical distinction that becomes apparent in Jane Sharp’s *The Midwives Book*. Although she does not explicitly define ‘girl’, Sharp uses the term solely to refer to female infants; she likewise uses ‘maid’ solely to refer to sexually mature but not yet sexually active young women. When discussing the production of biological sex in the womb, Sharp consistently describes the engendering of ‘boys’ and ‘girls’. She explains, for example, that ‘it is generally maintained, that Boyes are begotten from the right stone, but Girles with the left’. In contrast, Sharp consistently categorises young women who have entered adolescence as ‘maids’. When describing the onset and bodily effects of menstruation, Sharp describes the phenomenon as happening to ‘maids’. ‘Generally’, she writes:
maids have their terms at fourteen years old, and they cease at about fifty years, for they want heat and cannot breed much good blood nor expel what is too much; yet those that are weak sometimes have no courses till eighteen or twenty, some that are strong have them till almost sixty years old, fullness of blood and plenty of nutriment in diet brings them down sometimes at twelve years old.\(^{47}\)

In differentiating the maturing with the mature, Sharp defines ‘maids’ against ‘women’, and the linguistic distinction reflects what Sharp describes as a bodily difference. According to Sharp, ‘In those women that are married, [the labia] lye lower and smoother than in maids; when maids are ripe they are full of hair that grows upon them, but they are more curled in women than the hair of Maids.’\(^{48}\) Although not explicitly set out as defining categories, Sharp’s diction represents women’s life cycles as progressing from the category ‘girl’ to ‘maid’ to ‘woman’, a move that differentiates the female life cycle by age and bodily development but which also subsumes girlhood into a linear narrative. Instead of providing an alternative for ‘maid’ that breaks the bounds of socially prescribed roles for women, ‘girl’ in this formulation is merely an earlier stage on the way to becoming a ‘maid’.

III

Thomas Heywood’s *The Fair Maid of the West, or a Girl Worth Gold, Parts I and II* (c. 1600–3 and 1630) powerfully dramatises the transition from *copia* to difference in the vocabulary of female youth that I have been describing. Having explored the general shift that took place, I want to use his plays to demonstrate the larger implications of these lexical changes. The result of defining girlhood first and foremost as a time of life was to make the category of the ‘girl’ less subversive and less threatening to gender hierarchies. The transformation that takes place in the language used to describe Heywood’s heroine illustrates the way that the establishment of ‘girl’ as a dominant term for a female child came at the price of its ability to open up subversive female roles.

Over the course of the play, the title character Bess Bridges plays many roles, from an apprenticed drawer in Plymouth to a tavern owner in Foy to a cross-dressed sailor to a fine lady in Italy. At the age of almost seventeen, Bess is a ‘maid’ – a young and virtuous virgin – but she is also a ‘wench’, a ‘sweet lass’, a ‘tanner’s daughter’, a ‘she-drawer’ and, above all, a ‘girl worth gold’. Significantly, over the course of the two plays in which she appears, Bess is designated by all manner of terms with a diversity that reflects the rich and varied vocabulary of female
youth in early modern English. When the first part begins, Bess is an apprentice in Plymouth; when the second part ends, she is a wife who has travelled from England to Spain to Africa and back to Italy. Written almost thirty years apart, the two parts of *Fair Maid* provide an illustration of the complex and changing ways that ‘girl’ and its related terms were used in early modern English. In the first part, her fellow characters designate her with a multiplicity of terms regardless of her shifting clothing, class, marital status and geographical location. In the second part, Bess is still a ‘girl worth gold’, even after her marriage and sexual initiation, but the characters no longer speak with the same fluidity of language. Bess is almost exclusively called a ‘maid’ prior to her marriage and almost exclusively a ‘lady’ afterwards. This divergence of the second part of Heywood’s play not only indicates that Bess has changed her class status, but also marks an historical difference between the way sixteenth- and seventeenth-century language constructed and classified gender differences.

What makes *The Fair Maid of the West* so useful for investigating historical change is that the two parts share a common author, yet were composed at different moments in English history. Because of the Elizabethan tenor of Part I, critics generally fix its composition date between 1596 and 1603, a time when Heywood was writing for and acting with the Earl of Worcester’s Men, a group that performed at public theatres such as the Rose, the Curtain and later the Red Bull. Heywood has long been recognised as a dramatist whose plays reflected the lives and values of the middling class, and the first part of *Fair Maid* was written for the diverse audience of the late Elizabethan public stage. Although records of a performance of Part I do not exist, the printed edition of both parts in 1631 appeared after a Christmas performance at Hampton Court for Charles I and Henrietta Maria. In contrast to Part I, Part II therefore was addressed to a more aristocratic audience. The historical distance between the two plays and the different audiences provide the opportunity to trace historical changes and class differences. Those changes, I suggest, were responsible for the significant transformation in the representation of Bess Bridges. She goes from being a swashbuckling, cross-dressing entrepreneur to being a damsel in distress.

Initially, scholars tended to focus on Part I of *Fair Maid*, preferring the gender-bending heroine of Heywood’s earlier writing. Feminist critics have understandably found work on Bess to complement their research on dramatic figures like Moll Frith in *The Roaring Girl* and have paired her with cross-dressing female characters such as Shakespeare’s Viola and Rosalind, as well as Clara from *Love’s Cure*.49 Charles Crupi, Barbara Sebek and Claire Jowitt have recently provided analyses of the
two plays together, exploring the radical changes that take place in Bess Bridges’s personality and the social and racial issues raised by Bess’s interactions with the King and Queen of Fez. Sebek focuses on economic factors and global trade with North Africa, while Crupi and Jowitt both explore factors in the Caroline court that would have affected the representations of race and queenship in the 1630s. Informed by their interpretations of the political differences between these historical moments, my reading of the two plays focuses on the historical changes in the discourse of girlhood that mediated Heywood’s composition of Bess Bridges. The language that was available for the public stage at the turn of the century was different from the language that was available for the Caroline court in 1630, and it made a significant difference to the representation of her gender, class and racial identity.

Heywood was a writer who drew frequently from popular tradition, and as such the language with which his characters describe Bess in Part I reflected a popular vocabulary. Drawing on the ballad tradition, Heywood clearly tapped into the legends of Long Meg and Mary Ambree, two cross-dressing, fighting heroines who appeared frequently in chapbooks and ballads from the period and were popular reference points in plays when describing women engaged in masculine pursuits. In Part I, Heywood introduces Bess as a ‘she-drawer’, a tapstress in a tavern in Plymouth, where forces have been assembling for England’s campaign against Spain. In the midst of these foreign enterprises, Bess is a domestic paragon of virtue and beauty, the daughter of a trade-fallen tanner who has been sent into service because of her family’s economic difficulties. Bess is, as she proclaims herself, ‘a pattern to all maids hereafter / Of constancy in love’ (3.4.93–4), a key declaration that undergoes a telling metamorphosis in Part II. Although initially unable to marry her lover Spencer because of her lower-class status, Bess remains chaste and faithful, even after Spencer has had to flee Plymouth and has been (falsely) reported to have been killed in the war. She even disguises herself in men’s garments and sets out to recover his body so that he can be reburied in England. As an adventurer, Bess patterns herself on the cross-dressing heroines in ballads, chapbooks and other popular literature. She does, as she says she will, do all that she has heard ‘discours’d / Of Mary Ambree or Westminster’s Long Meg’ (2.3.12–13). The other characters may at times compare her to Queen Elizabeth, but Bess has more in common with those ballad heroines than with the virgin queen. That is to say, as Jean E. Howard has argued, that ‘Bess is not simply a screen for Elizabeth’, but is instead a repurposing of monarchical ideology to bring it in line with a form of English nationalism that related itself to the land of England as a geographical and regional entity, one
that, as I will discuss shortly, also took on a racial valence. Bess’s association with the virgin queen in Part 1 works to refashion those aristocratic symbols and ideologies with ‘the values of another social class’. Over the course of Bess’s adventures, her fellow characters name and rename her with the language of girlhood, a language intimately connected to her class status. The first part of Fair Maid is lighter and less moralistic than the second half, either because of the historical distance between the plays or because of the different audiences. By the second half, Bess’s origins in the working classes have ceased to be acknowledged in the language, whereas in the first part, her lower-class status is of paramount concern and is reflected in the terms used to describe her. In Plymouth, where Bess is a drawer of wine, she is frequently called a ‘wench’. Indeed, she is introduced by the First and Second Captains as ‘the best wench’ from the tavern with ‘the best wine’ (1.1.18–19). The Second Captain then refers to Bess as ‘a sweet lass’, one who is ‘wondrous modest’, ‘affable’ and ‘not proud’. She is, in effect, an oddity for a tavern woman because she is chaste, and an oddity for a chaste maid because she is affable. As Spencer acknowledges, ‘She’ll laugh, confer, keep company, discourse, / And something more, kiss; but beyond that compass / She no way can be drawn’ (1.2.60–3).

Much of the play’s action in Part I stems from Bess’s need to teach those around her how to name her, or at least how to understand the various names that can be applied to her. By refusing to be Spencer’s or anyone else’s ‘bawd’, Bess defies neat categorisation. Her lower-class status separates her from being eligible to be Spencer’s wife, and yet her chastity prevents her from falling into the category ‘whore’ – the derogatory status to which the ‘maid, wife, widow’ triad tries to relegate women who do not fall into its definitional categories. Faced with Bess’s singularity, Spencer invites Bess to join him for drinks by saying, ‘Gramercy, girl, come sit’ (1.2.65). But there is no stability in Spencer’s nicknames for Bess. No sooner has he called her ‘girl’ than he calls her ‘wench’ (1.2.86), a familiar term compatible with her class status. Though her virtue is never truly imperilled, at stake is others’ perception of her virtue, and Bess has to convince one man after another that as a single woman she is not necessarily a whore, a drudge or a strumpet. It is precisely an argument over what to call Bess that leads to Spencer’s ill-fated quarrel with his fellow gentleman Carrol. Entering the room where Spencer and Goodlack sit drinking with Bess in attendance, Carrol objects to the presence of a mere ‘she-drawer’ and calls her no more than what she is, a ‘tapstress’. However, because Bess’s occupation automatically evokes illicit sexual connotations, Spencer takes offence at Carrol’s language. Defending Bess’s honour against Carrol’s accusation
that she is a ‘drudge’ and a ‘housewife’, Spencer slays Bess’s detractor and sets off the play’s narrative action. Spencer flees and makes Bess the mistress of his tavern in Foy while he departs for the Azores.

That language is not merely reflective but also potentially constitutive of Bess’s identity can be seen in her initial encounters with Roughman, another character struggling to classify Bess and being thwarted in his attempts to fit her into fixed categories. When Spencer leaves Bess the tavern named the Windmill, Bess turns it into the most popular and successful tavern in Foy. She rises in economic and class status in Spencer’s absence, not through marriage, but through her own financial savvy. Having achieved economic independence, Bess becomes an unmarried female of independent means, and as such she puzzles Roughman. He openly addresses his linguistic dilemma, brazenly declaring his right to control Bess and her business: ‘I tell thee, maid, wife, or whate’er thou beest, / No man shall enter here but by my leave. / Come, let’s be more familiar’ (2.1.72–3). Portraying Bess as not fitting into the categories ‘maid’ or ‘wife’, Roughman insinuates that Bess occupies an unnamable position, a confused place that he signifies with the phrase ‘whate’er thou beest’. If not a ‘maid’ or ‘wife’, Bess occupies a sexually ambiguous position, and Roughman assumes that this gives him the right to make her ‘more familiar’. By implying that Bess is a ‘whore’, he hopes to make her into one. The conscious invocation of the ‘maid, wife, widow’ paradigm acts as an attempt to fix the definition of female youth within a marital narrative, but Roughman’s continued confusion over how to designate Bess reflects the way that these categories broke down in the face of female roles outside of this prescriptive paradigm. Over the course of a short section of Act 2, Scene 1, Roughman calls Bess ‘lady’, ‘minion’, ‘wench’ and ‘my good girl’, changing words every time he addresses her by anything other than her name (2.1.66, 70, 94, 103). Both his language and his behaviour indicate the way that Bess slips between names and defies a complete association between her and a single category. As she does throughout the play, Bess must teach Roughman that being young and unmarried makes her a ‘girl’, a ‘wench’, a ‘lass’ and a ‘maid’, but not a ‘whore’.

Bess successfully re-educates Roughman by countering his words with actions. She dresses in men’s clothing and challenges the braggart to a duel in the supposed persona of her brother. Unlike Shakespeare’s Viola, who wants at all costs to avoid fighting with Sir Andrew Aguecheek in *Twelfth Night*, or Rosalind, who faints at the sight of Orlando’s blood, Bess succeeds at her male impersonation. She exposes Roughman as anything but rough, proving him to be too cowardly to fight her. He neither retaliates when she physically strikes him nor responds to her
verbal accusation that he is ‘a villain’ and ‘a coward’ (2.3.51). Instead, she forces him to untie her shoe, untruss the point of her hose, and lie on the ground while she strides over him, stomping on him in the process. Instead of defending his honour, Roughman claims he has taken an oath not to fight that day and agrees to do ‘anything’ to avoid fighting (2.3.73). But with no witnesses to his humiliation, Roughman remains unconverted, and he immediately returns to his swaggering ways, verbally abusing Bess’s servants, striking her apprentice Clem, and attempting to kick her kitchenmaid. When Bess upbraids him, she calls him out on his bullying of weaker individuals. ‘I do not think that thou dar’st strike a man,’ she says, ‘That swagger’st thus o’er women’ (3.1.71–2). In response, Roughman dishonestly renarrates the encounter of the morning as if he had seriously injured the disguised Bess, rather than refused to fight her. Bess once again calls him out on his lie and reveals that she played the role of the male youth who struck and then trod upon Roughman. It is this revelation that finally brings about a radical reformation of the braggart.

Roughman’s conversion depends upon Bess’s convertibility from maid to man to woman, thus depicting her ability to shift back and forth between gender identities as having a positive transformative effect on those around her. Whereas Roughman’s initial humiliation has taken place in a quasi-private space, Bess threatens the further indignity of public violence on the streets if Roughman does not change his ways. Compelling Roughman to make a vow of redemption, Bess warns him, ‘Thou shalt redeem this scorn thou hast incurr’d, / Or in this woman shape I’ll cudgel thee / And beat thee through the streets. / As I am Bess, I’ll do’t’ (3.2.123–5). Having first beaten Roughman in the shape of a man, Bess threatens to beat him in the ‘shape’ of a ‘woman’, making visual Roughman’s emasculation and the cowardice that underlies his tyrannising over servants and women. Bess’s speech lays claim to womanliness in a way that calls attention to its mutability and sets up her continued cross-dressing in the play. In her earlier objections to Roughman’s behaviour, she has already called attention to her shape-shifting abilities, declaring that she ‘will have no man touch’ her servants but herself (3.1.52). For all the anxiety of the other characters, Bess’s dialogue in Part I expresses a level of comfort with moving between identities. When Bess takes to sea, for example, she declares that she has rich apparel for ‘man or woman as occasion serves’ (4.2.88). What defines Bess in Part I is a willingness to adapt herself, to play the role necessary to serve the occasion. She also reinforces social codes of masculinity in the process, paradoxically insisting that Roughman overcome his cowardly behaviour while laying claim to her own right to perform
masculine actions. In addition to being a ‘maid’ and a ‘girl’, Bess can also play a ‘man’ because she challenges gender boundaries more generally.

What Bess insists upon is her right to define and redefine herself. Together with Spencer’s friend Captain Goodlack and her apprentice Clem, Bess and Roughman will go on to wield swords side by side against Spanish pirates on the high seas. When Bess hears the false news that Spencer has been killed in Spain, she commissions the building of a ship and sets sail to recover the body of her beloved. As it turns out, because Fair Maid is a comedy, the Spencer killed in Spain is a different Spencer altogether, but it sets up a global journey that reunites the lovers in Fez, Morocco, where Bess must teach not only another character, but another culture, the difference between girls, women and whores. The passage that best encapsulates the sexual implications of the exchangeability of ‘whore’ for ‘girl’ is the one in which Mullisheg instructs Bashaw Alcade on the construction of his alkedavy. ‘Find us concubines,’ he commands:

The fairest Christian damsels you can hire
Or buy for gold, the loveliest of Moors
We can command, and Negroes everywhere.
Italians, French, and Dutch, choice Turkish girls
Must fill our Alkedavy, the great palace
Where Mullisheg now deigns to keep his court.

(4.3.28–34)

In this speech, Mullisheg makes plans for an international harem that includes multiple ethnicities of women, all of which, like the terms ‘damsel’ and ‘girl’, are relatively interchangeable. The inhabitants of his alkedavy make literal the play’s metaphoric title of ‘a girl worth gold’ by describing these girls as procurable with gold. Having not yet met an English woman, Mullisheg does not list English girls or damsels among his desired mistresses, but the appearance of Bess in his court leads to the desired addition of an English girl to Mullisheg’s long list of mistresses. Bess, however, disrupts the exchangeability of women through her position as a matchless paragon of beauty. Up until this point, Bess has exhibited what Howard calls ‘the almost miraculous power of the virgin woman to make flawed gentlemen into exemplary servants of the Protestant state’. Bess’s own mutability has the power to counteract the potential fragmentation of English national allegiances along class lines, and her arrival in Fez works to export that ability to other races and nationalities. In the first part of Fair Maid, Bess’s virtue is sufficient in itself to ward off the sexual advances of men, and simply witnessing her valour and loyalty to Spencer converts Mullisheg and leads him to
respect Bess’s chastity and England’s honour, at least until the opening of Part II. By the end of Part I, ‘a girl worth gold’ cannot be bought for money because she is above exchange. Bess’s role is to teach Mullisheg and the other men in the play that ‘girls’ are not interchangeable with ‘whores’ and, indeed, that ‘girls’ are simply not interchangeable. At the end of Part I, Mullisheg echoes the chorus’s earlier praise of Bess and declares:

Come, beauteous maid, we’ll see thee crown’d a bride.  
At all our pompous banquets these shall wait.  
Thy followers and thy servants press with gold,  
And the mean’st that to thy train belongs  
But shall approve our bounty. Lead in state,  
And wheresoe’er thy fame shall be enroll’d,  
The world report thou art a girl worth gold.  

(5.2.147–53)

The passage begins with Mullisheg invoking the ‘maid, wife, widow’ paradigm, promising to see Bess transformed from a maid into a bride and wife, but by the end of the passage he inserts a new term that disrupts the relegation of Bess into any of these roles. Instead of being remembered as a wife, Bess will be remembered as a ‘girl worth gold’, an adventure heroine who exceeds the social positions of the ‘maid, wife, widow’ schema. She may be a wife, but she will also be a ‘girl’.

Mullisheg’s prophecy that Bess shall be reported as a ‘girl worth gold’ was fulfilled in Bess’s literary afterlife. She was remembered, not predominantly as a ‘fair maid’, but as the ‘girl worth gold’. When first entered into the Stationers’ Register on 16 June 1631, Fair Maid was listed as a ‘Comedy Called the fayre mayde of the west: Ist and 2d pte’. The trope of the ‘fair maid’ was popular, and several other plays featuring ‘fair maids’ as their title characters appeared during the seventeenth century, including Heywood’s own Fair Maid of the Exchange (1607) and John Fletcher’s Fair Maid of the Inn (c. 1625–6). In each case, the ‘maid’ in question begins the play in a position of lower social status than she ends it. Bess is, however, much stronger and more independent than her fellow fair maids, and she was distinguished from them by being referred to in literary allusions as the ‘girl worth gold’. It was predominantly as a ‘girl worth gold’ that Bess lived on in contemporary memory. When T. B. refers to Bess Bridges in the prologue to The Country Girl, Bess is not a ‘fair maid’ but ‘the girl worth gold’. In the long run, alliteration seems to have triumphed over the earlier connection with the ‘Fair Maid’ genre of plays because by the time a Restoration adaptation of Heywood’s play was entered into the Stationers’ Register
on 5 April 1660, the order of Heywood’s title had been reversed into ‘a booke called A Girle worth Gold, or the famous History of the faire Maid of the West’. W. W. Gregg speculates that this book may well be John Dauncey’s *The English Lovers, or a Girl Worth Gold*, published in 1662, a prose text that dispensed with the ‘fair maid’ section of the title altogether. So popular was Bess Bridges that Heywood’s play seems to have been revived that same year on the stage at the King’s Arms in Norwich, where Edward Browne paid sixteen shillings to see the ‘Girl worth Gold’ and recorded the fact in his ‘Memorandum Book’.

Yet in Part II Bess is only called a ‘girl’ one time. By the time Heywood writes his sequel in 1630, Bess has become almost exclusively a ‘maid’ in the first three acts and a ‘lady’ in the last two, a linguistic shift that reflects the play’s heightened concern over Bess’s chastity. Although Bess’s chastity is important in Part I, her virtue is equally demonstrated by her talent at running a successful tavern, her generosity to the community, her good humour towards even those people who behave with disrespect towards her, and her bravery in going to sea and fighting pirates. By Part II, her virtue has become synonymous with her chastity, and she is in danger of ravishment first by Mullisheg, then by bandits on the coast of Italy, and finally by the Duke of Florence. Unlike the first part, where a mere demonstration of Bess’s virtues suffices to teach men to treat her correctly, Bess here is not in control of her body or the language used to describe her. Instead of Bess masterminding the action of the play as she did in Part I – commissioning the building of a ship to set sail on the English Channel, hatching a plot to teach Roughman a lesson, or even persuading Mullisheg of English virtue by demonstrating her willingness to die rather than be parted from Spencer – we find her dependent on the men around her. They defend her chastity and, for the most part, they determine her actions.

The first three acts of Part II outline the continuing adventures of Bess and her English cohorts in Fez, where Mullisheg has come to regret granting Bess permission to marry Spencer, and his attempts to force himself on Bess precipitate a number of acts of wit, courage and valour on the part of the English. His regret seems to function metonymically for Heywood’s regret that he has let Bess behave so unconventionally in Part I. Part II opens with Tota, the Queen of Fez, who does not appear in Part I. Barbara Sebek has read Tota as Bess’s dark double, a foil who ‘renders overt the covert anxieties about our upwardly and geographically mobile tavern wench’. In her reading, Part II displaces any anxiety that the viewer might feel about the upwardly mobile tavern wench of Part I by displacing Bess’s subversion of gender roles on to a racialised Other, for, as Sebek notes, Tota is both a ‘black Moor’ and a
‘Moorish woman’. Tota’s failed attempt to cuckold her husband intimates what might happen if Bess Bridges were not a paragon of chastity, and the Moorish Queen’s frustration at her husband’s neglect foreshadows the frustration that Bess will feel in Florence, when an unwitting vow by Spencer will temporarily keep the then-married couple apart. Claire Jowitt explicitly links these changes to a shift from an Elizabethan anxiety over female rulership to a Caroline understanding of the role of queen as royal companion, the model of queenship embraced by Henrietta Maria, one of the most prominent audience members at Part II’s first performance. Interestingly enough, for Jowitt the most relevant historical queen for Part II is not Queen Elizabeth but Roxolana, the powerful wife of Sultan Suleiman I, who, like Tota, was ‘represented as sexually predatory, manipulative, ruthless, and bloodthirsty, and a witch’. Tota surfaces in the second part precisely to register anxieties that were specific to the 1630s, and she becomes the foil, not for the upwardly mobile tavern wench of Part I, but for the solidly upper-class English maid and wife of Part II. Tota’s racialised threat comes through as a dangerous Moorish womanliness rather than as girlishness.

Tota poses the danger of predatory womanly sexuality, and Bess in Part II embodies the danger posed to female chastity by male sexuality. In Part I, by contrast, the anxieties raised with regard to Bess’s chastity stem from the other characters’ perception of her identity, rather than physical threats. When Captain Goodlack returns from Spain and tests her faithfulness to Spencer in Part I, Bess has to refute his accusation that she has been a whore and prove her loyalty to Spencer, but the audience has never been in doubt. Bess’s chastity has never truly been under siege. In Part II, on the other hand, the male characters repeatedly pose a physical threat, and her own desire to remain chaste remains insufficient to secure her identity as a chaste maid or wife. Oddly enough, this lack of female control over their own sexuality gets articulated in the beginning through an anxiety that wives will consciously but secretly betray their husbands in retaliation for neglect. Bess’s trick with the Duke of Florence and Spencer at the end of the play turns out to be a mirror image of Tota’s wifely revenge that rewrites female sexual transgression as chastity, an opposition that begins as one between different female life positions and ends by redefining womanhood as wifehood.

Rather than embodying multiple female identities in Bess, Part II splits them along racial and gendered lines between the two characters Tota and Bess. In the process of expressing rage over her husband’s attentions to Bess and subsequent neglect of herself, Tota positions herself as a ‘woman’ in opposition to Bess, the maid. ‘I should doubt’, she says, ‘I were a perfect woman, but degenerate / From mine own sex,
if I should suffer this’ (1.1.12–15). Tota defines a ‘perfect woman’ as one who takes revenge. This is inevitably influenced by Tota’s role as the ‘Other’ woman, one who is married to a Moorish king and who is doubly ‘Other’ by not being Moroccan, though we never learn her nationality. Following as it does from the valorisation of girlhood in the play’s first part, Tota’s discussion of womanhood demonstrates the change of direction in the second. Whereas Bess’s womanly and girlish behaviour in Part I promises to keep Roughman in line and promotes social order, Tota’s womanly behaviour threatens to disrupt and corrupt English purity. As Howard and Jowitt have suggested, Part I displaces the rapacious sexuality that the English men fear in Bess on to the lustful Moroccan King of Fez, and it has the effect of feminising him even as his sexuality also threatens (quite literally in the case of Clem, who gets offered the position of Eunuch) to unman the English.62 What stands out in Part II, however, is the extent to which that feminisation gets localised in a female character. Yet for all her vengeful plans, Tota refuses to blame Bess for Mullisheg’s treachery. Instead, she hatches a plot to sleep with Spencer, one that revenges her on her husband but does not cause him bodily harm. Tota employs Roughman to bring her to Spencer’s bed on Bess and Spencer’s wedding night, while Mullisheg, having changed his mind about letting Bess marry Spencer, employs Goodlack to bring Bess to his bed instead of Spencer’s. The English, however, pull a bed trick and conduct the monarchs into each other’s arms. This act of conventional comedic stagecraft, however, is not Bess’s idea but Goodlack’s. In contrast to Tota, who sees her womanliness as dependent on taking action and making plans, Bess is reduced in Acts 1 to 3 to making requests like ‘Gentleman, amongst you all, rescue an innocent maid from violence’ (2.1.65–6). As Kathleen McLuskie notes, ‘Bess has lost her active role, and is the subject of others’ passions.’63

Through the events that transpire during the English group’s attempt to escape, Mullisheg is eventually restored to virtue, but more through Spencer’s virtues than Bess’s. Spencer is separated from Bess and the others during their attempted escape, and she vows to commit suicide if he does not return alive to her ship. Having been captured by Bashaw Joffer, Spencer makes a pact with Bashaw Joffer, promising to return of his own accord after he returns to the ship to prevent Bess’s suicide. Bess and the rest of the English crew urge Spencer to break his vow, but Spencer upholds his ‘honour’ and insists on returning despite Bess’s protestations. Bess does, however, return to Mullisheg’s court to try to rescue Spencer, a rare moment of her old resolve coming through in Part II. The spectacle of so much English bravery shames Mullisheg into behaving honourably. As the scenes from Fez draw to a close, Mullisheg
once again calls Bess a ‘girl’, the last time she will be a ‘girl’ in the play: ‘A golden girl th’art call’d, and, wench, be bold; / Thy lading back shall be with pearl and gold’ (3.3.184–5). Accompanied with the gift of a wedding dowry, Mullisheg’s label of ‘golden girl’ comes across as a vestigial remnant of an earlier identity. She is ‘call’d’ a ‘girl’ rather than actually being one here, and she will not be called one again. Bess and Spencer consummate their marriage at sea; from then on Bess’s class position and chastity will be her defining characteristics.

After leaving Fez, the English are parted by a shipwreck, and Bess, Clem and Roughman wash up on a beach with Italian bandits. Left behind as Clem flees and Roughman tries to fight off one group, Bess is captured and threatened with ravishment. Gone is the Bess of the first part, who wielded a sword next to her followers. Instead, she has to be rescued by the timely appearance of the Duke of Florence. From that point forward, in accordance with her new class and marital status, the characters consistently refer to Bess as a ‘lady’. In keeping with the emphasis on her sexual status, the metaphor of the ‘girl worth gold’ who is really worth more than gold transforms to a lady’s worth being based upon her chastity. As the Duke says to Bess, ‘You are richer in our high favour than / All the royalty Fez could have crown’d / Your peerless beauty with; he gave you gold, / But we your almost forfeit chastity’ (4.1.144–7). After a series of more misunderstandings, Bess, Spencer and the English group eventually reunite, but not before another promise between men again disrupts the heterosexual marriage bonds. The Duke falsely claims that an unknown woman (Bess) is his mistress, and he extracts an unwitting vow from Spencer never to embrace her. In a parallel incident to the one in Fez where Spencer gave Bashaw Joffer his word of honour to return, Spencer’s vow produces a misunderstanding between the lovers, since Bess cannot understand why her husband will not speak to or hold her. Her retaliation reveals much about her transformation from Part I and about the way Heywood attributes a lack of agency to his female character. In Part I, Bess calls herself ‘a pattern to all maids hereafter / Of constancy in love’ (3.4.93–4). In Part II, she declares herself a ‘precedent / To all wives hereafter how to pay home / Their proud, neglectful husbands’ (5.2.79–81). As a maid, Bess has active virtue; she loves and remains constant by choice. As a wife, she has the power to revenge, but her husband has the power to be inconstant, and her only recourse ostensibly lies in responding with her own inconstancy. Indeed, Bess’s general impotency and inability to access the girlishness that served her so well in Part I leads her to behave in a remarkably similar manner to the Moorish queen from whom the play has worked to distinguish her. As Jowitt has rightly pointed out,
in times of crisis ‘Bess also places her personal satisfaction above the honorable claims of nationality or religion’, collapsing the differences between the two women.64 Bess retaliates by pretending to become the Duke of Florence’s mistress, kissing him in front of Spencer and seeming to call for Spencer’s death. In the end, she turns the scene on its head, declaring that since she has the power of Spencer’s life, she sentences him to spend his life with her as her husband and to forego any rash vows, a move that shows wives that they should be constant even in their inconstancy. Unlike Tota, however, whose threatened sexual transgression was foiled by the bed trick of the English, Bess’s transgression was never meant to succeed in earnest. In fact, she transforms wifely transgression into reunion, undoing the sexual threat posed by the Duke of Florence’s sexual aggression. Her love for Spencer converts the Duke, as her love for Spencer converts Mullisheg in Part I, but the difference lies in her methods. In Part I she comes boldly forth and declares her willingness to die on his behalf; in Part II she uses her wits, but she must do so in a covert way. Heywood grants her agency, but it has a different cast from the kind she exercises in Part I.

The effect of these differences appears quite vividly in the play’s language. If Mullisheg declares that Bess will be reported as ‘a girl worth gold’ at the end of Part I, the Duke of Florence makes no such gesture in his concluding speech (5.2.147–53). His choice of words clearly contains Bess within the ‘maid, wife, widow’ paradigm: ‘Thus much in your behalf we do proclaim: / The fairest maid ne’er pattern’d in her life, / So fair a virgin and so chaste a wife’ (5.4.198–200). No longer does Bess disrupt categorisation; she has been narrated into the role of chaste wife.

Although I have used Fair Maid as a case study, Heywood’s heroine seems to have been part of a general trend. The differences between the Bess of Part I and the Bess of Part II can also be seen in her fellow stage heroines. I will explore the Dekker and Middleton play The Roaring Girl in more depth in Chapter 2, but it is worth noting that, like the Bess of Part I, Moll Cutpurse was a cross-dressing, independent girl with a willingness to pick up a sword and fight. The girl characters that appeared on stage around the same time as the Bess of the second part of Fair Maid were significantly less powerful. T. B.’s The Country Girl was a comedy that was, like Fair Maid, evidently quite popular. Entered into the Stationers’ Register in 1640 and published in 1647, The Country Girl was most likely being acted even earlier. It was later adapted for the Restoration Theatre Royal and republished under the name The Country Innocence: Or, the Chambermaid Turned Quaker in 1677. Copying the style of Middleton and Dekker’s prologue to The Roaring
Girl and providing a taxonomy for types of girls, *The Country Girl*’s prologue refers to both Moll Frith and Bess Bridges:

Before I speake, me thinkes, I heare some say,  
What can there be, to furnish out a Play,  
In such a Home-spun Title?—In a Plaine  
Poore Countrey Girle? Such, yeilds no lofty straine;  
No sinewie stuffe, extracted from a Myne  
Of deep and Abstruse reading; no strong line,  
No such a straine, and this poore Title, lust  
Like old Pan’s Bagpipe, and Apollo’s Lute.  
What must we looke for then? A desperate wit?  
Scoenes, full of veins, where, without a Hit  
No man escapes, comes neere it? This indeed  
Were to some purpose; and the way to speed.  
But this too’s from this Title.—None of these?  
Alas poor Girle, where’s then, thy hope to please?  
What can she sing? And, like the Northerne Lasse,  
(That brave blithe Girle) hope to procure a pass?  
Or, can she fight?—If so so stout, so bold  
A brave Virago, like the Girle worth Gold.  
Or is she one, that once a Countrey Maid,  
Crack’d in the carriage, is come to Trade,  
And set up some new Leaguer? Or suppose  
Our Girle, a vertuous Copy, and so close  
This inquisition of her, —She is—what?  
Her owne presentment, best can tell you that,  
Which be but pleas’d to grace, which love and favour,  
You make the poore Girl rich, and Crown our labour.65

Although named after Margaret, the country girl, the play hardly revolves around her the way that *The Fair Maid of the West* does around Bess and *The Roaring Girl* around Moll. Margaret’s eventual marriage to Captain George Mullinax is an afterthought, and Margaret is chiefly remarkable not for her feats of daring or for her smart business sense, but for her protection of her chastity. Courted by her father’s landlord and patron Sir Robert Malory, Margaret refuses to compromise her chastity and collaborates with Sir Robert’s wife Lady Malory to teach him a lesson. That lesson, however, does not involve Margaret besting Sir Robert in swordplay. Her family, at Lady Malory’s request, dresses up in fine clothing and pretends not to know Sir Robert. Sir Robert is confused enough to admit his intentions with regard to Margaret and to vow his faithfulness to his wife. Otherwise, Margaret is singularly unremarkable for a title character.

Among the characters also seen as part of the tradition of girl characters mentioned in *The Country Girl*’s prologue was Constance,
The unremarkable heroine of *The Northern Lass* (written 1632, published 1684), who, like Margaret, exhibits none of the verve of Bess Bridges. Though the play itself was popular, the title character of Richard Brome’s Caroline play seems to have been primarily notable for her singing. As a character, she provides a caricature of northern English dialect, and unlike Bess she neither embarks on adventures nor undergoes any kind of character development. Hopelessly in love with Sir Phillip Luckless, who has just been married to a wealthy widow, Constance the northern lass spends most of her stage time singing tunes to demonstrate her melancholy. That the music was the main attraction can be seen by the fact that the Stationers’ Register records a copyright not only for the play, but also for its ballads.

The contrast between these later girl characters and Bess was not a coincidence but the result of a deliberate attempt to fashion a different kind of female youth. When Stephen Brome, the author’s brother, wrote his prefatory poem to the 1632 quarto, he praises Constance precisely for not being like Bess:

> Thy witty sweetnesse beares so faire a part.  
> Not a Good woman, nor a Girle worth Gold,  
> Nor twenty such (who so gaudy shewes take hold  
> Of gazing eyes) shall in acceptance thrive  
> With thee, whose quaintnesse is superlative.66

By embedding a sexual pun on ‘cunt’ and ‘quaint’ in his praise of Constance, Stephen Brome makes it clear that she is a character whose sexuality defines her. Within the play itself, Luckless initially rejects Constance, the northern lass, because he confuses her with Constance, a local whore. By juxtaposing Constance’s name with that of a whore, Brome scripts Constance into a narrative of female sexuality that defines women by their chastity or lack of chastity.67

What Bess’s successors on the seventeenth-century stage suggest is that rigidifying the vocabulary of female youth corresponded to the perception of girls as less subversive and less powerful. That is not to say that there were no powerful female youthful characters in Caroline drama – far from it – but that the linguistic act of ‘girling’ a character on the stage seems more likely to be used to sexualise or belittle young women rather than mark their transgression of gender boundaries. The flexibility that enabled ‘girl’ to open up roles for Bess Bridges outside the ‘maid, wife, widow’ paradigm became muted over time. As the vocabulary of female youth became more precisely defined, characters like Bess in *Fair Maid Part II* lacked the power to define the terms that defined them. Once ‘girl’ could be incorporated into a taxonomic schema, it
became part rather than disrupting of the ‘maid, wife, widow’ narrative. In the interim, however, ‘girl’ had the power to create an imaginative space in which female roles could go beyond prescriptive positions and fair maids could also be golden girls.

Notes

1. Thomas Cooper, *Bibliotheca Eliotae* (London, 1548), title page. The number of editions of Elyot's dictionary and Cooper's revision attests to their popularity. Elyot's first edition was published in 1542 with errata and was followed by a corrected edition in 1545. Cooper's revision followed in 1548 along with three subsequent expanded editions in 1552, 1558 and 1559. The endurance of this particular dictionary can further be seen in its forming the basis for Thomas Bestney, *Thesaurus Linguae Romanae & Britannicae* (London, 1587).

2. The title page's terms 'castigate' and 'augment' might at first appear to work against each other but are not contradictory in terms of Cooper's lexical project. The Latin root verb *castigare* means 'to chastise, correct, or reprove', with connotations of purifying and chastening, whereas *augmentare* means 'to increase'. The reproductive associations of the latter would seem at first glance to contradict the anti-proliferation with which we might associate the former. For Cooper, however, to give a more accurate and purer signification of words importantly did not mean paring down the number of English alternatives but increasing them.


4. For an in-depth discussion of these terms and their histories from the perspective of linguistics, see Grzegorz Kleparski, *Theory and Practice of Historical Semantics: The Case of Middle English and Early Modern English Synonyms of Girl/Young Woman* (Lublin: University Press of the Catholic University of Lublin, 1997).


14. ‘Girl’ only appeared in these ‘hard word’ dictionaries when it meant ‘A Roe Bucke of two yeares’, as in John Bullokar, *An English Expositor: teaching the interpretation of the hardest words in our language* (London, 1616). Otherwise, ‘girl’ was an everyday term and was translated rather than explained.


17. As I will discuss further in Chapter 4, historians disagree over the extent to which girls would have experienced formal apprenticeship. K. D. M. Snell argues that there were a greater variety of positions available to women than previously thought, whereas Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos points out that most women were apprenticed as domestic labourers rather than as part of the formal guild system. See Snell, ‘The Apprenticeship of Women’, in *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England, 1660–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 270–318, and Krausman Ben-Amos, *Adolescence and Youth in Early Modern England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 135.


21. Ibid. sig. L5v.

22. Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary of the English Language* (London, 1786), Vol. 1, sig. 5Bv. Johnson also remarks upon the uncertain etymology of ‘girl’ and provides an account of various lexicographers’ explanations, including Minshew’s association with the Latin *garrula* or ‘prattler’. He also reports Junius’s speculation that ‘girl’ may be related to the Welsh *herlodes*, related to the English word ‘harlot’, but this trace of the association between girlhood and promiscuity remains the only remnant of the earlier, more wide-ranging connotations of girlhood. Johnson’s choice of quotations illustrating the meaning of ‘girl’ includes several from Shakespeare, and they emphasise the definition of ‘girl’ as a young woman.

23. Ibid. Vol. 1, sig. 2B3v. Johnson also records two supplementary entries for ‘boy’. The first notes that the word signifies ‘one in the state adolescence; older than an infant, yet not arrived at puberty or manhood’ and the second that ‘boy’ can be a derogatory term signalling the immaturity of young men.
24. The linguist Anne Curzan’s work on language and gender confirms my sense that girls are the default association when it comes to children. She writes, ‘Historically, there is an observable tendency to use sex-specific terms for male children in contrast to gender-neutral terms for children, which then must be assumed to refer to girls . . . It may be that for children, as opposed to adults, girls are the more culturally salient subset.’ See her Gender Shifts in the History of English (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 157.

36. See Kleparski, Theory and Practice of Historical Semantics, p. 129.
38. See Kleparski, Theory and Practice of Historical Semantics, p. 143.
41. See the following passage on the falling, which states that if it is developed ‘after thee byrth by some accidentall causes’ that ‘yf it leaue not the chylde beyng a man chylde before he be .xxv. yeare of aege / and the woman chylde about the tyme of hauing her fyrste flowers, yf it forsake them not in this space / neyther by the myght of nature / neyther of medycynes / then is it lyke neuer to depart frome them.’ Eucharius Rösslin, The Byrth of Mankynde, trans. Richard Jonas (London, 1540), sig. LXXVIr.
42. Ibid. sig. LXXXIIIv–LXXXVr.
43. Thomas Raynald, The Byrth of Mankynde, or the Womans Book (London, 1552), sig. Diiiv.
47. Ibid. p. 69.
48. Ibid. p. 38.
51. See Warren E. Roberts, ‘Ballad Themes in *The Fair Maid of the West*’, *Journal of American Folklore* 68 (1955), p. 19. Roberts has traced *Fair Maid*’s connection to two major ballad themes from the British tradition: the first is ‘the lover who returns from the wars and tests his sweetheart’, and the second is ‘the maiden who disguises herself as a sailor or soldier and follows her lover to sea or to the wars’. The first theme of the lover returning from war can be seen in such seventeenth-century ballads as ‘The Valiant Seaman’s Happy Return to His Love’ (1676), ‘A Pleasant New Song Between a Seaman and His Love’ and ‘The Pensive Maid’ (1672–80). Roberts speculates about whether the ballads are the source of the play or the play the source of the ballads and concludes that both must be derived from a previous common source, probably earlier ballads.
53. Ibid. p. 109.
54. Ibid. p. 106.
60. Ibid. p. 191.
67. It is hard not to agree with Samuel Pepys, who said of a performance of *The Northern Lass* in 1667, ‘Knipp acted in it, and did her part very extraordinary well, but the play is but a mean, sorry play.’ Quoted in Bentley, *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage*, Vol. III, p. 82.