In *England’s Merry Jester* (1693), the writer J. S. relates a story in which a pert ten-year-old girl reveals the pressure that girlhood could place on early modern gender ideologies. When admonished by her mother for not looking at the ground when speaking to men, the girl points out, first, that her mother’s lesson on female submission has come too late and, second, that there is nothing natural about women deferring to men:

A Girl about ten years old, had got a trick of confidently staring in mens faces when they were talking; for which her mother reproved her, saying Daughter, our Sex enjoins us Modesty, and you ought to be bashful, and look downward when you are in mens company, and not to stand gazing and gaping as if you were looking babies in their eyes: to which the pert girl replied, This lecture forsooth, should have been read in my former ignorant Ages, but every age grows wiser and wiser; that maids of every age know better: Men indeed, may look down on the primitive dust, from whence they were taken, but Man being our original, I will stare in their faces, say what you can to the contrary.¹

This jest functioned as the kind of disruptive ‘vector of critique’ that Pamela Allen Brown discusses in her book *Better a Shrew than a Sheep: Women, Drama, and the Culture of Jest*. As Brown has shown, women were actively involved with jest literature – collecting, revising and reiterating jokes within the household and the larger community.² The mother may be the object of the girl’s defiance, but the primary targets of the girl’s disdain are the men who claim to be superior to women, making the oral repetition of the jest an occasion for communal female laughter at the expense of men (and women) attempting to enforce outdated social codes. With this jest book, the announcement in the title that the jests have been fashioned to be ‘suitable to the humours of the times’ seems particularly relevant. The girl in this jest becomes a vehicle for articulating the ways that female children could be indoctrinated
into subordinate subject positions via education and the corresponding ways that they could refuse those positions precisely because they were learned. By denying the social hierarchy on which her mother’s directive is founded, the girl – and I would suggest it is significant that J. S. labels her a ‘girl’ – performs a defiant form of biblical exegesis. Early modern debates about the relationship between the sexes often focused on Genesis. Whereas misogynists used Adam’s precedence as proof of male superiority, defenders of women harnessed the same information to argue for equality.3 This girl imitates the defenders, but takes it one step further. Men, she suggests, should modestly gaze at the ground, since they came from it.

The daughter’s response exposes the tension between what conservative social customs maintained women ‘ought’ to be and what women actually ‘were’. The very need to control female behaviour, to insist that the female ‘Sex enjoins . . . Modesty’, exposes the fact that women were not naturally modest but that modesty was imposed upon them through social and cultural restraints. Although early modern structures of power deployed assumptions about a ‘natural’ order, the need to reproduce gender hierarchies through systems of social control revealed the subjugation of women to men as a powerful but artificial institution – one that needed to be ingrained in children while they were still young and malleable. Otherwise, as this girl suggests, a female child who came into maidenhood would be too wise to accept the status quo.

This chapter is about three female characters who, like the girl in this jest, stared men in the face, whatever social pressures were in place to prevent them from doing so. In the three texts I examine – George Gascoigne’s The Adventures of Master F. J. (1573), William Shakespeare’s The First Part of Henry the Sixth (1592) and Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker’s The Roaring Girl (1611) – early modern conversations revolving around children in general and female youth in particular gave rise to female characters who challenge the boundaries of the early modern sex-gender system. Though not female children, Gascoigne’s Elinor, Shakespeare’s Joan la Pucelle and Middleton and Dekker’s Moll Cutpurse occupy gendered positions inextricably linked to their identifications as ‘girls’. These writers drew on the innovations taking place in the vocabulary of female youth to participate in the fashioning of a discourse of girlhood that consistently marked it as a time of relative freedom compared to womanhood, which even in its idealised form was nonetheless signified as a time of containment. As a result, the term ‘girl’ seems to have been mobilised to describe adult women who were sexually, but perhaps more importantly socially and politically, transgressive. Through their girl characters,
these three texts expose gender as an irreducible social fiction rather than a biological fact, and they construct early modern femininities as multiple and performative rather than singular and natural – as learned behaviours, rather than expressions of inborn traits.

To move from an investigation of language itself to an investigation of the way language produced multiple categories of femininity and femaleness, I am going to read these texts in tandem with prescriptive educational manuals in which early modern writers were acutely aware that female human beings had to be trained to be ‘women’. I am doing so to suggest that paying attention to the category of the ‘girl’ does for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries what Monique Wittig sees as one of the goals of materialist feminism, namely the destruction of women as a ‘natural group’, that is, ‘a racial group of a special kind, a group perceived as natural, a group of men considered as materially specific in their bodies’.4 I am not suggesting, of course, that we disregard female bodies or the particularities of women’s experiences. I agree with Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford that female bodies as well as the discourses about them were central to early modern women’s lives. As they note, sexual difference ‘is not just a matter of discourse but “has a bodily dimension”’.5 But not all early modern female human beings would have experienced their bodies in the same ways, and simply the fact of having a female body does not create a shared cultural experience. What I am suggesting is that we need to think of the term ‘women’ as a social relation rather than a biological fact, and that the addition of the term ‘girl’ to our critical vocabularies forces us to do so; as Judith Butler reminds us, the gendered subject is always constituted and brought into existence by the very power structures that claim to represent the subject.6 What early modern girlhood contributes to today’s feminist theory – and what I would add to Wittig’s and Butler’s insights – is this: the category of ‘women’ (which Butler identifies as the ‘subject of feminism’) is not the only female subject position brought into existence through structures of power. It’s crucial that we look at the historical specificity of the way that other subject positions, such as ‘girl’, have been constituted discursively, socially and culturally, and how those positions have overlapped with and been distinct from ‘woman’.

Feminist theorists have long recognised that definitions of masculinity and femininity are historically and culturally contingent, and although the terms themselves get recycled, their definitions ‘are never settled once and for all but are constantly in the process of being remade’.7 I want to start by pointing out the way girlhood complicates the linear trajectory between the two models of early modern femininity that Anthony Fletcher describes as a shift from a negative to a positive model
of gender difference. Although he acknowledges that the process happened unevenly and gradually, Fletcher suggests that an older misogynist view of women as inherently corrupt and undesirable gave way over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to a more companionate view of women as men’s complementary opposites. This was the result, Fletcher suggests, of women internalising prescriptive moral advice about how to be good wives and mothers, and he claims the effects were twofold. First, cultural representations – from conduct books to pamphlets and plays – came to portray chaste, silent and obedient behaviour as ‘natural’ to women rather than the result of careful education. Second, this ‘naturally’ chaste femininity replaced the older notion of ‘naturally’ unruly femininity. In a more genre-specific analysis, Karen Newman has traced a similar shift in conduct manuals, from writers aiming to fashion female individuals into appropriately chaste feminine subjects to later Protestant-inflected treatises portraying a companionate model of feminine subjectivity. Newman, I want to emphasise, provides a nuanced and politically aware account, and she sees the shift in conduct literature not as a change in women’s status but as a change in how they were ‘interpellated as social and sexual subjects’. Throughout her account, Newman makes it clear that naturalness was a social production.

Nonetheless, I want to trouble this narrative by pointing out that any simple ‘masculine/feminine’ binary was complicated by the existence of multiple femininities; the very notion of a negative form of femininity presupposes the existence of its opposite, and as I will argue, early modern conduct literature and education manuals never unequivocally represented gender as ‘natural’. Behaviour coded as ‘unfeminine’ at certain moments was coded as quintessentially ‘feminine’ at others, making it very hard to maintain a simple teleology in the progression of the female life cycle. The representation of what I will be calling girlish femininity in texts like *The Adventures of Master F. J.*, *1 Henry VI* and *The Roaring Girl* had a way of exposing womanly femininity as a constructed patriarchal fantasy of idealised female subordination. Rather than seeing one set of gender determinants replacing another, I want to hold these definitions together and suggest that the concept of ‘girlishness’ made both types of femininity into performative acts. Rather than seeing a progression from ‘naturally’ bad femininity to ‘naturally’ good femininity, or from ‘constructed’ femininity to ‘natural’ femininity, I suggest that these texts figure competing models of femininities as sets of behaviours that form social relations, not as pre-discursive biological facts.
The precondition for the construction of girlishness as an alternative form of femininity was the formulation of gender itself as acquired rather than ‘natural’. Early modern conduct literature was part of a larger tradition of children’s education that characterised children of both sexes as particularly susceptible to evil yet apt to be formed into good members of the Christian commonwealth. Adapting the classical tradition’s emphasis on early oratorical instruction, early modern teachings emphasised the importance of raising children in the knowledge of Christ, ‘even from their very cradles’. In the cradle of religious debate, children occupied contested ground – quite literally with regard to saving their souls while in the cradle. Post-Reformation religious writings positioned infants in the middle of a struggle between the Catholic, Protestant and sectarian movements for the future of England’s religion. Raising children as part of a particular faith was seen as necessary to each religion’s continuation, and doing so was seen as God’s particular charge for every parent. Otherwise, in the words of Lady Grace Mildmay, children’s minds would be tainted and corrupted ‘even from their infancy’. Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos has shown that despite Protestantism’s emphasis on the need for grace from God and the propensity of all human beings to sin, conduct manuals and Protestant autobiographies nonetheless shared with Catholicism a belief in the peculiar susceptibility of children. The main difference that she sees is that Protestant writers were more likely to emphasise the potential sins of parents who did not do enough to protect their children rather than the sins of the children themselves. Hugh Cunningham likewise points to slight differences between Protestant and Catholic attitudes toward the importance of bringing up children in the Christian faith, partly because Catholic parents, unlike Protestant ones, were more likely to be reassured that their child’s soul had been saved by infant baptism. He suggests that Reformation and Counter-Reformation writers share a preoccupation with the religious education of children but that what distinguishes Protestant conduct manuals is the emphasis on the family’s (rather than the Church’s) role in conducting that education. Because Protestants saw the family as a kind of mini-Church, the responsibility for making Christian children shifted from church ceremonies and sacraments to the parents and educational figures. The result was that in religious education, the emphasis on beginning instruction in female infancy in Protestant writings centred on the place of the female child in the household, a habit so strongly ingrained that in Elizabeth Isham’s *Book of Remembrance* she explic-
itly thanks God for letting her be born to parents who had her baptised and raised in the Church:

And hearein I call to mind thy goodnes O Lord in caussing me to be borne of religious parents: who brought me into thy Church, to receve the Blessed Sacrament of Baptisme even the seale of regenaration; which was on Sunday for which I praise my God that I had the praiers of a full Congregation that I might be one of thy flooke; for which I praise thee.14

A similar praising of good Christian caretakers appears in John Duncon’s 1649 account of the life of Lettice Cary, Viscountess Falkland, whose religious zeal supposedly began in the cradle: ‘There were care taken while she was young, that she should be brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord; She came not from her Nurses arms without some knowledge of the principles of Christian religion.’15 Duncon’s claim may seem hyperbolic, but in light of anxieties like Grace Mildmay’s about the susceptibility of children, it is in keeping with early modern cultural fantasies about the impressionable state of infants and the need to bring them up as good Protestants. Even at a ‘tender age’, children were never too young to begin their religious educations, and it was the responsibility of their caretakers to provide it.16

The key point to remember is that the notion of children as tainted with original sin and in need of spiritual education existed in tension with narratives of miseducation, and ideas about the acquisition of gender exhibit similar frictions between nature and nurture. As Rebecca Bushnell has shown, humanist metaphors likening education to gardening posit innate, natural differences between male and female minds, yet insist upon the need for proper cultivation in order for the seed to grow into a healthy plant. Children might ‘naturally’ follow a bad course if left to their own devices, but they still had a course to follow. The ‘natural’ in this theoretical system exists within a cultural framework, particularly when it comes to gender. Sixteenth-century humanist educational treatises represented femininity, like masculinity, as an educational product, and their educational programmes implicitly and explicitly aimed to fit children for their future social positions. Girls and boys alike were being fitted to fulfil roles inflected by gender and class, and those roles were not straightforward extensions of inborn proclivities, particularly when it came to female infants and children.17 As Bushnell has shown, humanist pedagogical theories were pulled in two directions, toward an insistence on a universal human rationality on the one hand and an insistence on women’s natural mental inferiority on the other.

Not surprisingly, representations of the natural weaknesses of female children in humanist educational manuals often exist in tension with
the sense that female minds therefore need cultivation. We can see such a tension in the work of the Spanish humanist Juan Luis Vives, who remarks at the opening of his influential *Instruction of a Christen Woman*, translated by Richard Hyrde and published in 1529, that if a boy’s ‘begynnyng and entrance’ into oratorical training should be ‘taken from the cradell’, then ‘moche more diligence ought to be given in a Christen virgine’. With an emphasis on the acquisition of morals and personality traits rather than learning a set of skills, Vives depicts raising up a girl from the cradle as absolutely crucial to forming her into a social subject. Of course, the same could be said of princes; Erasmus and Thomas Elyot both advocated instructing royal boys and noblemen earlier than private individuals, but Vives’s admonitions were not meant to groom her to rule as sole monarch but to be ruled over by a Christian husband. What made humanist attitudes toward the early education of female children different from their attitudes toward male children was that they insisted girls needed training to acquire gender much more so than wisdom.

As such, the formal and informal educational systems of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England aimed to inculcate particular kinds of femininity that fitted the social roles that female individuals were expected to fulfil. Humanist pedagogical theories ‘orient themselves doubly – to the nature inherent in gender and rank and to social function’. That is to say, humanist beliefs about female dispositions having inherently different properties from male dispositions could be held in tandem with beliefs about the need to produce femininity in those female dispositions. Vives expresses the belief that women ‘be more disposed to pleasure and dalyance’, and yet his conviction functions to reinforce the need for maids to learn via ‘custom’ to be honest and virtuous. Vives’s educational treatise still relies upon the notion of Christian femininity as a learned behaviour. He is not just describing what a good Christian woman should be but providing practical advice for how to make female children into one. Though he acknowledges that Xenophon, Aristotle, Plato, Jerome, Ciprian and Ambrose ‘have entreated of maydes and wydowes’, he claims they have done so in ways ‘that they appere rather texhort and consayle them unto som kynde of lyuing, than to instruct and teche them’. Whereas his classical predecessors had praised female virtues, Vives seeks to provide tangible, material ways to instil them. As conservative as Vives’s ideas about female education may have been, they have the effect of exposing feminine behaviour as a social production.

It is crucial to note that the production of aristocratic femininity left out a significant number of female individuals from being able
to be produced into the category of ‘women’ – including members of the lower classes and non-Christians. Compared to other educational manuals, the sentiments of Vives’s book were decidedly aristocratic in their preoccupations. Admittedly, *The Instruction of a Christen Woman* (*De institutione foeminae Christianae*) has been argued to have had a broader appeal, primarily based on the number of editions and the inclusion of the word *foeminae* rather than *principis* in the title, a departure from previous pedagogical tracts aimed at royalty.\(^22\) As a result, Vives’s manual has been widely seen as the most influential sixteenth-century text on women’s education, having gone through nine English and over forty European editions, including translations from the original Latin into Dutch, French, German, Italian and Spanish. Nonetheless, what constituted a woman, and hence what constituted ideal Christian femininity, was inseparable from class in Vives’s manual. It was written for Catherine of Aragon in 1523 and intended as a guide for the studies of then Princess Mary Tudor. If the text was indeed as popular as the number of reprintings suggests, its success most likely resulted from bourgeois class aspirations, rather than the applicability of Vives’s advice to the general female populace, very few of whom would have had the same educational needs as the Princess Mary. The crucial difference between Vives and later humanist texts that engage with a discourse of girlhood is that he describes women as possessing various degrees of one type of femininity rather than possessing multiple types of femininities, an effect heightened in Hyrde’s translation, which translates the Latin *puella* as ‘mayde’ in the early chapters on female youth, as in the title of Book 1, Chapter 4, which Vives labelled ‘*De Doctrina Puellarum*’ but Hyrde renders as ‘Of the lernyng of maydes’.\(^23\) Completing the translation right on the cusp of the period in which ‘girl’ emerged as a gender-specific term, Hyrde picks up on Vives’s emphasis on chastity, relying on the ‘maid, wife, widow’ formulation of the female life cycle, which corresponds to the three books of the treatise. The category of the ‘girl’ does not exist in the English translation of Vives. Until the female children in the manual had been properly interpellated into womanly subject positions, they could not be properly said to be feminine, and hence not properly ‘women’. Consequently, the treatise excludes a number of people with female bodies from the category of the ‘Christian maid’ and ‘woman’.\(^24\)

Richard Mulcaster’s *Positions Concerning the Training Up of Children* (1581), on the other hand, formulates a distinctly girlish form of female behaviour that was recognisably feminine and recognisably different from Vives’s chaste, silent and obedient version of femininity. Like most humanist tracts on pedagogy, *Positions* focuses on the
education of boys; girls and young maidens appear only in a brief sidebar on women’s education. Yet despite Mulcaster’s brevity, his remarks illuminate the association in early modern culture between ‘natural’ femininity and girls. Mulcaster advocates that parents and teachers follow the same set of principles when setting a plan of study for girls as they do for boys, customising the programme depending on the aptness and abilities of the pupil. The difference for Mulcaster lies in the ‘natural’ abilities of girls compared to the ‘natural’ abilities of boys. As Rebecca Bushnell has shown, humanists like Mulcaster assumed that girls ‘by nature follow a different life cycle’, and therefore ought to follow a different educational path. While Mulcaster initially pays lip service to equal access to education for girls, he undercuts such a claim through an appeal to girls’ weaknesses:

For though the girles seeme commonly to have a quicker ripening in witte, then boyes have, for all that seeming, yet it is not so. Their naturall weaknesse which cannot holde long, delivers very soone, and yet there be as prating boyes, as there be pratling wenche. Besides, their braines be not so much charged, neither with weight nor with multitude of matters, as boyes heades be, and therefore like empty caske they make the greater noise. As those men which seeme to be very quicke witted by some sudden pretie aunswere, or some sharp replie, be not alwaye most burthened, neither with lettes, nor learning, but out of small store, they offer us still the floore, and hold most of the mother.

Acknowledging with discomfort what many contemporary educators have also noticed – that young girls often learn more quickly than young boys – Mulcaster attempts to explain the phenomenon not in terms of social practices but in terms of what is natural to girls and boys. Girls ‘naturally’ have weaker brains, making them more impressionable but less likely to hold impressions; boys have harder wits that take longer to imprint but that fix impressions more firmly. This representation of the female mind corresponds to the common poetic device of metaphorising women’s hearts as waxen, easily taking the impression of a seal and just as easily melting to receive a new impression. However, Mulcaster undercuts his own attempt to set up this ‘natural’ gender difference along biological lines through his attempt to explain away girls’ quick wits. His cross-sex example of the way quick-witted men mask their empty heads with sharp retorts unsettles his attempt to ground sexual difference in male and female brains. His example turns the biological into the behavioural, the general into the specific.

As an intellectual version of a common poetic trope, the idea that quick wits lack retention was not unique to Mulcaster. Roger Ascham had made a similar claim eleven years earlier in The Scholemaster (1570).
in a way that likewise drew connections between gender and intellectual capacity. ‘Quicke wittes’, Ascham insists, ‘commonlie be apte to take, unapte to keepe.’ The traits that Ascham identifies as characteristic of the ‘quickest wittes’ read like a laundry list of the charges made against unwomanly women. They are ‘in desire, newfangled, in purpose, unconst, light to promise any thing, readie to forget every thing . . . bolde, with any person; busie, in every matter: soothing, soch as be present: nipping any that is absent’. These are exactly the kind of behaviours that would come to be regarded as girlish in adult women. Mulcaster’s incorporation of Ascham’s argument into his own takes an implied connection between quick wits and effeminate behaviour and makes an explicit link to girls; even as Mulcaster attempts to ground this kind of gender difference in the body, the very fact that male and female brains can be ‘unconstant’ and ‘light’ and ‘forgetful’ undermines his attempts.

Indeed, it is precisely the need to shape the female subject that fuels the need to clearly articulate the competing models of femininities. Conduct manuals frequently conflated Christian behaviour with gendered behaviour, mapping a moral valence on to what the writers considered socially appropriate for men and women. Being feminine in a particular way thus took on a religious and moral imperative, and these writers aimed to ensure that girls aspired to become women who fulfilled prescribed roles within the existing sex-gender system. Thomas Becon, for example, incorporated the admonitions that we associate with conduct manuals into A New Catechisme, a dialogue between a father and his precocious son, a boy who talks more like an adult than the five-year-old he is purported to be. The catechism dramatises the process through which children acquired religious knowledge at the same time that it harnesses doctrinal and scriptural interpretations in the service of inculcating social values. Rather than portraying what he considered appropriate feminine behaviour as natural, Becon, like Vives before him, figures it as the product of a religious upbringing, and his catechism lays the groundwork for seeing girlhood as a potentially disruptive and empowering state because he figures it as a site of resistance to becoming an appropriately chaste, silent and obedient woman, one that is consciously adopted by unruly adult women.

Becon’s emphasis on educating children and bringing them up in the Protestant faith reveals an awareness that children have to be taught social behaviour, particularly gendered social behaviour. Education, according to Becon’s father and son, is the key to ensuring that women are not idle, so much so that the son actually calls for the establishment of schools for women. In a move that perversely anticipates arguments by eighteenth-century feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary
Astell, the father and son suggest that if women and girls were better educated, they would be better members of society:

Father: If all our maids and young women were thus brought up, we should not have so many idle, unhonest, and lewd women, as we have at this present day.
Son: To bring this thing to pass, it is expedient that by public authority schools for women-children be erected and set up in every Christian commonweal, and honest, sage, wise, discreet, sober, grave, and learned matrons made rulers and mistresses of the same, and that honest and liberal stipends be appointed for the said school-mistresses, which shall travail in the bringing up of young maids, that by this means they may be occasioned the more gladly and willingly to take pains. And to this end without doubt at the beginning were the monasteries of solitary women, who we heretofore called nuns, built and set up, and endowed with possessions of our godly ancestors, although in process of time they were greatly abused.30

As Wollstonecraft and Astell would later link women’s ignorance to faulty educations, the father and son blame the number of ‘idle, unhonest, and lewd women’ on their defective upbringings. Unlike those eighteenth-century feminists, however, the main concern in Becon is not improving the state of women. The schools that the son envisions would not be aimed at bettering the social position of women; they would instead be instruments of social control – the very embodiment of what Louis Althusser would have described as ideological state apparatuses.31 These imagined schools for women-children would ensure that they grew up to be properly interpellated into gendered positions. Even the son’s interpretation of nunnery, which had previously offered young women an alternative to marriage, reformulates what had been a religious end into a means of producing particular kinds of ‘women’.

The emphasis in prescriptive writing on making good women out of female children had an unintended consequence. As we have seen, it led to the dichotomising of girlish and womanly femininities, and Becon provides one of the clearest formulations of this contrast. The hybrid genre of his text arises from the use of religion to shore up existing gender hierarchies in early modern theories of social order. In order to entreat Protestant women of all ages to behave in womanly (that is, appropriately subordinate and chaste) ways, Becon self-consciously invokes a girl/woman dichotomy in his attempts to teach the self-regulation of female behaviour. The foremost concern in the section on ‘The Office and Duty of Old and Ancient Women’ is costly apparel, which the son claims ageing women use to offset their diminishing youth and beauty. Rather than ‘decking and trimming’ themselves with ‘vain and light apparel’, the son admonishes older women to dress modestly and deck themselves inwardly with a ‘beautiful array of virtues’:
‘For after this manner,’ saith blessed Peter, ‘in the old time did the holy women, which trusted in God, tire themselves.’ Therefore the holy apostle, willing to bridle this foolish, vain, and carnal affection of trimming themselves in their old age, commandeth all sage and ancient matrons, that they, laying aside all light and girl-like apparel, array and tire themselves with such raiment as becometh the women that profess godliness.\textsuperscript{32}

In a passage that is at once sexist and ageist, the son associates girlishness with frippery, covetousness and worldliness – all aspects frequently associated with the feminine but paradoxically constructed as unwomanly here. The ostensible concern about older women’s (supposedly) excessive interest in material goods underscores a particular anxiety about the power that age might bestow upon women. An older woman’s costly raiment would be problematic because it would enable her to exercise agency in the sexual economy via the material economy. As Karen Newman has shown, despite the fact that fashion was first and foremost a marker of class in early modern England, and despite the fact that men’s dress was equally elaborate, sartorial extravagance could frequently be coded as feminine or effeminate. Particularly in Jacobean London, where a burgeoning merchant class and rapid influx of foreign goods were reconfiguring economic hierarchies, femininity was ‘an available imaginary’ through which writers could express anxieties about changing power dynamics.\textsuperscript{33}

Becon’s catechism, however, does not seem caught up in the kinds of contemporary economic anxieties of later urban pamphlets like 	extit{Hic Mulier} (1620) or 	extit{Haec Vir} (1620),\textsuperscript{34} and thus provides an interesting foil for texts in which femininity maps on to sartorial extravagance as a displacement for class anxiety, rather than as a direct expression of gender ideology. The son’s association of worldliness with girlishness has wide-ranging implications for the category of girlhood. Material and erotic pursuits are unwomanly, and yet the construction of them as ‘girl-like’ implies that they are inherently feminine. This is, of course, the abiding paradox of traditional gender ideologies that construct women as innately susceptible to moral misdeeds even as they represent women as being the embodiment of morality. This classic virgin/whore dichotomy is transformed, however, when the two terms involved are woman/girl because these words are far more complex and multifaceted. If worldly pursuits are ‘girl-like’, then is there a time when they are appropriate? Is girlish behaviour forbidden in young female children, or only in mature women? What we have in Becon is the production of multiple femininities, the girlish and the womanly, the worldly and the spiritual, the unruly and the contained. The tension between girlhood as a time of life and girlhood as unruly behaviour opens up a space for
negotiating female power and authority within the self-contradictory fissures of patriarchal ideology. Because definitions of girlhood as female childhood co-existed with definitions of girlishness as unruly femininity, the discourse of girlhood became a crucial tool for navigating the unstable demands of early modern gender norms.

Becon ultimately left unanswered the questions I’ve asked above, but other genres raised them in different ways and with different results. Writers like Gascoigne, Shakespeare, Middleton and Dekker picked up these questions when they shaped some of their most memorable female characters. But instead of seeking to move female children out of the untamed space of female youth, as the writers of conduct manuals and educational treatises did, these writers tapped into emerging discourses of girlhood to open up the question of whether it was in women’s best interests to be ‘womanly’. By designating adult female characters as ‘girls’, these three texts reconstituted womanly femininity not only as a learned performance, but also as a performance that adult women might refuse. These writers participated in a widespread cultural imagining of girlhood as a type of unruly femininity that existed in tension with definitions of girlhood as a time of life, and their ‘girl’ characters fragment categories of female identity, figuring the girlish as an action that a woman (or man or boy or girl) might play.

II

In the earliest of these texts, an almost identical formulation of Becon’s girl/woman dichotomy appears. George Gascoigne published the novella *The Adventures of Master F. J.* in his miscellany-style collection of drama, poetry and prose entitled *A Hundreth Sundrie Flowers* (1573). Written to appeal to the same tastes as William Painter’s *Palace of Pleasure* (1566), *The Adventures of Master F. J.* offered an original English story similar to the translations of short prose romances that were making their way into print in the late 1560s and 1570s. Unlike Painter, however, Gascoigne’s prose incorporated self-conscious irony, and though it is not written in the mannered style of John Lyly’s slightly later *Euphues* (1578), Gascoigne’s use of framing devices highlight his awareness of the story’s form as well as its content. Like Becon’s *Catechisme*, Gascoigne’s English novella defines girlishness as unruly female behaviour. But Gascoigne’s dichotomy is less stable, and his text provides a rich example of the friction between these categories. Even as *The Adventures of Master F. J.* produces girlhood and womanhood as separate gender categories, it does so in ways that blur the distinctions
between them and call into question the advantage of conforming to the type of feminine behaviour that moralists like Becon prescribed.

*The Adventures of Master F. J.* enacts, among other things, a complex comparison of the two types of femininity. G. T., the story’s intrusive narrator, presents the main female characters as foils. F. J.’s married mistress Elinor and his virginal admirer Frances are kinswomen, and both are members of a northern English household at which F. J. is a guest. According to G. T., the similarities end there. F. J. falls in love with Elinor and attempts to woo her through letters and poetry; in the course of his courtly flirtations, F. J. piques the curiosity of Frances, who first becomes F. J.’s confidante by encouraging him in his pursuit of Elinor and then uses her position to enlighten F. J. about Elinor’s past affairs. After detailing F. J.’s successful pursuit of Elinor and Frances’s attempts to redirect his romantic attentions away from Elinor and towards herself, G. T. becomes anxious that Frances’s behaviour may come across as jealous and manipulative. In defence of Frances, G. T. differentiates between the two equally beautiful rivals for F. J.’s affection by labelling one girlish and the other womanly:

[Lady Frances was] a virgin of rare chastitie, singular capacitie, notable modestie, and excellent beauty: and though F.J. had cast his affection on the other (being a married woman) yit was ther in their beauties no great difference: but in all other good gifts a wonderfull diversitie, as much as might be betwene constancie and flirting fantasie, betwene womanly countenaunce and girlish garishness, betwene hot dissimulation and temperate fidelitie.

Pairing woman/girl with constancy/fantasy and fidelity/dissimulation, the narrator places womanly and girlish behaviour in opposition to each other. In G. T.’s formulation, womanly behaviour abjures girlishness, defining itself through a willingness to submit modestly and chastely to patriarchally sanctioned marriage. ‘Girl’ in turn is a placeholder category encompassing all that is considered unwomanly. Rather than being defined by age or marital status, girlhood here is a gender category defined by illicit female sexual desire.

Yet as much as the narrator would like to set womanliness and girlishness in opposition to each other, the woman/girl dichotomy breaks down. In my explication of G. T.’s passage, I maintain a consistent order among the paired terms to illustrate the conceptual distinction being made. The text itself does not, and the slippage suggests that the categories might not be as easily differentiated as the narrator would like. Having placed the positive, womanly traits first throughout, G. T. departs from this precedent in the final pair and places the negative, girlish trait of dissimulation before fidelity. Given the careful
The craftsmanship of Gascoigne’s prose, the narrator’s unconscious slip should not be attributed to authorial oversight. Rather, it reads like an intentional comment upon the intersections between the two categories and the two female characters. Until recently, critics have tended to take G. T.’s characterisations of Frances and Elinor at face value, casting Frances as an ideal of womanhood and Elinor as her moral opposite. In the past decade, however, several scholars have begun recognising that when read in the context of the rest of the text, many of Frances’s actions could be described as ‘hot dissimulation’. Steve Mentz has argued that the etymology of “Frances,” meaning “frank” or “honest,” is ironic because ‘Frances is as duplicitous and witty as her corrupt companions’. Susan Staub, on the other hand, emphasises the ‘hot’ part of Frances’s character rather than her ‘dissimulation’. She sees Frances, not Elinor, as the true unruly woman. As Staub astutely points out, Frances, though unmarried and declared a chaste virgin, clearly becomes titillated and turned on by watching F. J. and Elinor’s sexual exploits. Frances lays claim to the usually masculine privilege of gazing at the object of her desire, Staub argues, whereas Elinor is content to be an object of desire for men. I would add that there is no concrete indication in The Adventures that Frances wants to marry F. J. rather than simply obtain him as her lover.

The contrast between Frances’s marital aspirations and Elinor’s adulterous actions were not made overt until Gascoigne reprinted his volume as The Posies of George Gascoigne two years later. In The Adventures of Master F. J., Frances never explicitly states that she wants to marry F. J.; she could, as far as the reader is concerned, simply want to be his lover. It is not until Gascoigne revised the tale that any mention gets made of Frances marrying him. In the retitled The Pleasant Fable of Ferdinando Jeronimi and Leonora de Valasco, translated out of the Italian riding tales of Bartello, Gascoigne recast the entire tale in light of Frances’s father’s desire to find a husband for her. The Lord invites Ferdinando (as the second version renames F. J.) to his house for the explicit purpose of promoting a marriage with his daughter Frances, who is briefly renamed Francischina before Gascoigne reverts to her English name. The text also initially renames Elinor with the Italian sobriquet Leonora, but also does not maintain the switch. Thinly disguising his original work as a translation and moving the setting to Florence, Gascoigne renamed the characters and eliminated the narrator G. T. Though the two women keep their English names, their narrative fates are different enough in the revised version to bear on our understanding of the text’s construction of girlishness. In The Pleasant Fable we learn that Elinor continues undetected in her affair with her secretary, while Frances pines away
and dies of a broken heart. Most critics agree that this move was an attempt to quell censorious responses to his first version, which was accused (falsely, if we believe Gascoigne) of being drawn from life. The Stationers’ Company records have been lost for the year 1573, so whether the Court of High Commissioners actually banned the book is unclear; but Gascoigne’s preface to The Posies indicates that the text was revised in response to criticism over the volume’s dubious morality.

This later version actually has more radical implications for the relationship between girlhood and womanhood. The majority of critics prefer Master F. J. because it has a more complex authorial apparatus that configures the text as an exchange of letters presented through multiple layers of narration and, more importantly for my purposes, because they consider the original the ‘less moralized version’. As a result, most editors choose to base their editions on Master F. J., including the alternative ending of The Pleasant Fable for comparison. Recent critics, however, have questioned the sincerity of Gascoigne’s claim that he has ‘gelded’ his text of offensive passages as part of an overall personal reformation. Whether Gascoigne’s claims of reform are genuine or feigned, the revised version does not produce the moral effects to which it lays claim.

At the heart of the controversy over the original version of the tale in The Adventures of Master F. J. was its lack of a moral conclusion. The risqué and transparently euphemistic descriptions of sex might have been less objectionable had they been followed by a suitably moralised ending. In the context of an early modern ethos that so clearly denigrated ‘girlish’ behaviour in women, Gascoigne’s novella is remarkable precisely because Elinor’s girlish actions do not lead to inevitable ruin. Her behaviour never gets exposed. The alternate ending of The Pleasant Fable heightens the distinctions between the two female characters, but in a way that punishes Frances for her womanliness and continues to let Elinor off the hook. Whereas in The Adventures of Master F. J. the future of its three main characters remains a mystery, The Pleasant Fable leaves the reader in no doubt as to what befalls them. Instead of concluding with F. J.’s final poem, the now-nameless narrator goes on to reveal that Ferdinando’s experience with Elinor disillusions him so much that he abandons Frances, leaves the city of Florence and squanders the rest of his life in dissolute living:

he tooke his leave, & (without pretence of returne) departed to his house in Venice: spending there ye rest of his dayes in a dissolute kind of lyfe: & abandoning the worthy Lady Fraunces Chima, who (dayly being gauled with the griefe of his great ingratitude) dyd shortlye bring hir selfe into a miserable consumption: whereof (after three yeares languishing) shee dyed.
Any moral drawn from such a passage is necessarily equivocal. The narrator is sympathetic to Ferdinando throughout the text, despite his pursuit of a married woman, and the text neither portrays his dissolute life as a punishment in itself nor reinforces such an interpretation through invoking religion or the possibility of punishment in the afterlife. Similarly, despite the narrator’s condemnation of the ‘girlish’ Elinor/Leonora, her affair with Ferdinando does not result in any tangible long-term consequences. Her husband never discovers the affair, and she continues on unrepentant. In the narrator’s words, ‘Notwithstanding al which occurements the Lady Elinor liued long in ye continuance of hir accustomed change.’ In contrast, Frances fares much worse. Ferdinando returns to Venice after Elinor rejects him in favour of her secretary, and his departure precipitates Frances’s death. She loyally pines away for the absent Ferdinando. However much the narrator may praise Frances’s womanly behaviour, it clearly comes with a price. The literary effect is not exactly one that would encourage female readers to pattern their behaviour on the ‘womanly’ Frances. This story, as G. T. admits at the end of the first version, is a ‘thriftlesse History’. Excessive in its twists and turns, the text ends with no resolution. No marriage takes place, and it seems that no lesson has been learned by any of the people involved. Elinor is significantly ‘unrepentant’, to use Roy Erikson’s word, and her lack of repentance was evidently shocking enough to some portion of its early modern audience to result in censure.

For us, the main misfortune that Elinor suffers as the result of her affair is the rape that G. T. describes using flippant innuendos in Master F. J., and modern readers are rightly disturbed by the trivialising way that G. T. describes the violent incident. As disturbing as the narrator’s minimisation of Elinor’s trauma may be, it is worth noting that G. T. does not represent the rape as a punishment for her affair. The narrator’s dismissive attitude prevents the scene from being read as a moral parable of what happens to women who cuckold their husbands. Having gone to F. J.’s bed, Elinor finds herself accused (correctly) by her lover of also carrying on an extramarital affair with her secretary, and his jealousy provokes her angry denials. In retaliation and fury, F. J. forces himself on Elinor, and G. T. describes the rape as sexual combat. Having forgotten the courtesies of courtly love, F. J. ‘drew upon his new-professed enemy and bare her up with such violence against the bolster that, before she could prepare the ward, he thrust her through both hands, and etc; whereby the dame, swooning for fear, was constrained for a time to abandon her body to the enemy’s courtesy.’ The narrator’s deliberate omission of details and use of ‘etc’ position the reader with the swooning Elinor as equally unable to view the incident
fully. Her abandonment is temporary, however, and the result of having been taken unprepared. She leaves the room swearing never to be taken ‘at the like advantage’ and finding ‘her hurt to be nothing dangerous’, and sleeps peacefully the rest of the night. Although G. T.’s refusal to acknowledge her rape as traumatic clearly participates in a misogynist enterprise, it is worth noting that Elinor makes good on her promise. She never submits to his sexual will again.

Moreover, the elimination of the rape scene in the second version leaves Elinor as having experienced no tangible consequences as a result of her illicit sexual behaviour. As such, her decision to leave Ferdinando and return to her secretary is not a function of any abuse, but the result of her sexual desire. In both versions, the narrator clearly tells us that the secretary’s ‘quils and pennes . . . prick such faire large notes’ that Ferdinando’s/F. J.’s ‘playne song’ no longer appeals to her. With a less than subtle sexual innuendo, the narrator in the second version is left to attribute Elinor’s change of heart almost exclusively to Ferdinando’s sexual inadequacies. In contrast, Frances languishes over Ferdinando and pays with her life for her unwillingness to change her affections. Susan Staub has read Frances’s death as a punishment for being an unruly woman. While I agree with Staub that the second version tames Frances, I read her death as a consequence of her having been tamed rather than the means of taming her. Her death results from playing the woman in a world that does not necessarily reward such behaviour even as it insists upon it.

The split between girlish and womanly behaviour typified by Elinor and Frances is crucially one between two types of femininity. Neither Elinor nor Frances directly engages in what Judith Halberstam describes as female masculinity. Unlike the two ‘girl’ characters I will be examining next, Elinor and Frances do not cross-dress, and Gascoigne does not characterise their behaviour as masculine. In so far as their actions challenge the patriarchal order, they do so from within subject positions that are explicitly feminised. The girlish traits exhibited by Elinor, and to a lesser extent by Frances, are those frequently ascribed as proper to, though undesirable in, female human beings. Girlishness here is performative, but also squarely located in stable feminine subject positions. In contrast, Joan la Pucelle in The First Part of Henry the Sixth and Moll Frith in Middleton and Dekker’s The Roaring Girl engage in pursuits coded as ‘masculine’ within the texts in which they appear. In both these cases, their categorisations as ‘girls’ call into question the epistemological and ontological status of gender. On the early modern stage, where boys played female characters, female identities would necessarily have been performative, but so too would male identities, and these
cross-dressing female characters queried how and whether early modern audiences could know the differences between ‘men’ and ‘women’. Both these plays associate girlishness with movement between gender identities, and the characters deploy the discourse of girlhood less to mark specific sets of behaviours and more to identify female transgression itself.

Although Joan’s sexuality in 1 Henry VI has been generatively explored in feminist criticism, the connections between the play’s representation of Joan and early modern discourses of girlhood have remained a footnote. Joan’s connection to the category of the ‘girl’ lies in a textual crux from the trial scene of 5.6, when the Duke of York condemns her to be burned at the stake as a sorceress. Joan initially rebukes her English accusers, but when she realises that they will not yield, she attempts to postpone her execution by claiming to be pregnant. By ‘pleading the belly’, Joan should have been granted a temporary reprieve under English law, and, according to the chronicles, the historical Joan did in fact receive a nine-month stay of execution. Within the play, however, her strategy backfires because her supposed pregnancy only makes the English more determined to kill her. Assuming that the Dauphin is the father of the child, Warwick insists that the English will not let the ‘bastard’ live (5.6.70). Joan tries to improvise a new strategy to save her life, denying that the Dauphin has fathered the child. She claims first that Alençon is the father, and when the English still deny her mercy, she moves on to claim René, King of Naples, as the father. Upon hearing Joan name a third man as a potential father for her child, and by extension confessing to having had three sexual partners, York makes a statement that redefines Joan. He declares, ‘Why, here’s a girl’ (5.6.80). Editors traditionally gloss over this line, either skipping it altogether or annotating ‘girl’ as ‘wench’, as if the substitution offered an adequate explanation. By ‘girling’ Joan, York recategorises her as not a ‘maid’ but a ‘girl’, a move that invokes connotations of sexual transgression and, more importantly, sexual transgression matched with a threat to social and political hierarchies.

Shakespeare’s Joan brings the question of girlishness into the realm of the history play, a genre concerned, as Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin note, with ‘an aristocratic world where patriarchal domination is assumed and female characters marginalized’.49 As they point out, the subject of history plays is ‘the difficult transmission of patrilineal authority from one generation to the next’.50 Women, particularly in Shakespeare’s first tetralogy, haunt the margins of chronicle histories as potential disruptive forces and reproductive conduits, but they do not take centre stage because the main characters are kings and fathers,
princes and sons. Simply forcing her way into the masculine space of political history makes Joan a transgressive figure; for her to do it as a peasant girl makes it doubly so. Through most of 1 Henry VI the male characters express anxieties about Joan’s cross-dressing and class-crossing, but in the trial scene the threat that Joan poses to patrilineal authority comes in the specific form of her reproductive capacity. Her pregnancy could provide the Dauphin with an heir, thereby prolonging the military conflict between the French and the English. Joan poses more than just a symbolic threat by crossing categorical boundaries; her sexual incontinence could disrupt English political ambitions. Unlike Shakespeare’s cross-dressing comic heroines, whose masculine attire has often been read as gesturing back to the body of the boy beneath the costume, the revelation of Joan’s pregnancy points not to the literal male body on stage but to Joan’s imagined female body, and it is her fictional female body that poses the greatest threat to her English male accusers.

The play never makes clear whether the audience believes that Joan’s pregnancy is fact or fiction; instead, Joan’s purported pregnancy underscores her hypocrisy and undermines her claims of virginity. Diverging from the historical record, including the politicised English histories that Shakespeare would have read, this scene leaves open the imaginative conflation of Joan’s politics with sexual promiscuity. Theodora Jankowski has suggested that the goal of dramatising Joan’s sexual incontinence was to undo her historical position as a ‘queer virgin’, which she defines as ‘women who chose to resist incorporation into the sex/gender system as sexually active women by retaining their virginity beyond its “transitional phase” well into adulthood’.51 That is, queer virgins ‘are those who confound the sex/gender system not by trying to be men, but by not being “women”’.52 Joan does exactly this but, as Jankowski acknowledges, not as a queer virgin. I would argue that the category of the ‘girl’, a different but equally unruly female category, best accounts for Joan’s position and sheds significant light on York’s comment. The play only fully articulates Joan’s status as a ‘girl’ with the revelation that an unruly female body underpins her female masculinity. Though she is initially threatening because she is a French female character who wears armour and leads an army, the trial scene reveals that Joan’s reproductive capacities, not her masculinity, pose the greatest threat to her male English accusers. I want to suggest that Joan’s girlishness helps to deconstruct the masculine/feminine binary in ways that render both terms virtually empty of meaning. Unlike Gascoigne’s prose novella, where two separate characters epitomise the dichotomy between girlish and womanly femininities, Shakespeare’s play portrays Joan as acting out multiple female identities herself. She is a chaste
French peasant maid, a martial masculine warrior and a demonic whore all rolled into one, and this combination ultimately culminates in her explicit identification as a ‘girl’.

Unlike Gascoigne, Shakespeare establishes Joan’s identity as a ‘girl’ less in opposition to womanhood than in opposition to maidenhood. Through most of the play, Joan is associated with virginity in her own speech and that of the other characters. From the Bastard of Orleans’s first mention of Joan as a ‘holy maid’ (1.3.30), Joan is remarkable not only because of her youth (she is only eighteen) but because of the combination of her lower-class status, chastity, martial prowess and French nationality. The construction of her femininity is inseparable from all of these, which combine to place her outside of the category ‘woman’. She exceeds her sex, as Joan claims in Act 1, Scene 3, and yet she positions herself explicitly in the feminine subject position of ‘maid’. Calling attention to her lower-class origins as a shepherd’s daughter when she first encounters the Dauphin, Joan uses class-inflected language to describe her body as transformed physically through her heavenly vision of the Virgin Mary:

Lo, whilst I waited on my tender lambs,
And to sun’s parching heat displayed my cheeks,
God’s mother deigned to appear to me,
And in a vision, full of majesty,
Willed me to leave my base vocation
And free my country from calamity.
Her aid she promised, and assured success.
In complete glory she revealed herself—
And whereas I was black and swart before,
With those clear rays which she infused on me
That beauty am I blest with, which you may see.
Ask me what question thou canst possible,
And I will answer unpromeditated.
My courage try by combat, if thou dar’st,
And thou shalt find that I exceed my sex.
Resolve on this: thou shalt be fortunate,
If thou receive me for thy warlike mate.

(1.3.55–71)

Joan’s own self-fashioning figures her masculine attire and strength as proceeding from her identity as a martial maid and as the Virgin Mary’s particular emissary. Joan describes her transformation from peasant to prophet as bodily, as a bleaching of her ‘black and swart’ skin through the light of the virgin, who infuses Joan with her glory and chastity. Along with this elevation of class comes the endowment of a certain paradoxical amount of physical strength; although a maid, Joan claims
the position of ‘warlike mate’, and she bests the Dauphin in one-on-one combat. To be sure, she locates her strength in her divine mission, but she also attributes it to a female lineage, claiming that ‘Christ’s mother helps me, else I were too weak’ (1.3.85). She represents her transformation as bodily as well as spiritual, and in many ways ongoing; her continued relationship to the Virgin Mary produces physical effects that enable her to perform feats of strength and go beyond her biological capacities. Joan’s speech represents her prophetic maidenhood as a contingent state of being, one located at the nexus of the social and the supernatural.

For the same reasons that Joan exceeds the category of ‘woman’, the other characters call into question her location in the category of ‘maid’. The English characters cast doubt on Joan’s sexual continence because her contingent female identity enables her to cross-dress, fight in battles and intervene in political affairs. When, for example, Bedford asks who the ‘Pucelle’ is ‘whom they term so pure’, Talbot replies doubtfully, ‘A maid, they say’ (2.1.20–1). By adding the qualifying phrase ‘they say’, Talbot expresses scepticism about whether such a name can properly be attributed to Joan. Bedford’s response likewise expresses disbelief that a virgin can engage in military activities. ‘A maid?’ he questions, ‘And be so martial?’ (2.1.22). Rather than prompting the Englishmen to question their assumptions about masculinity and femininity, Joan’s behaviour calls her chastity into question. The name of whore always seems to haunt the name of virgin in this play, a connection already embedded in the pun on ‘pussell’. Talbot invokes this pun when he first hears of ‘Joan la Pucelle’: ‘Pucelle or pussel, Dolphin or dogfish, / Your hearts I’ll stamp out with my horse’s heels’ (1.4.107–8). Playing on the homophone between the French pucelle, virgin, and the English ‘pussell’, or strumpet, Talbot also recalls the other homophonic connection between ‘pussell’ and the female genitals, equating Joan with her sexual organs in the way that the virgin/whore dichotomy often does.

As a term and gender category, the word ‘girl’ mediates between the categories of the virgin and the whore, potentially signifying both and eliciting the epistemological problem of sexual knowledge. Shakespeare’s representation of Joan raises the question of how a virgin can be distinguished from a whore, and throughout most of the play the answer is that she can’t. To make such a distinction visually possible, the play dramatises Joan’s role as a ‘girl’ by spectacularly staging a group of devils forsaking her. For an English audience, Joan’s purity would already have been doubtful as a matter of course. When she boldly states, ‘Assigned am I to be the English scourge’ (1.3.108), it would not have gone over well. The term ‘scourge’ would have linked her with figures like Christopher Marlowe’s Tamburlaine, making her...
heroic yet despicable, possibly a divine instrument but nonetheless
demonic. As a scourge, Joan might very well be acknowledged to have
God’s sanction to punish the English for their sins, but since God was
thought only to use souls who were already damned as scourges, such
a claim would have placed Joan’s own salvation in doubt. Significantly,
Joan never repents or recants. She exits to her execution cursing the
English, hoping that the sun will never shine upon their country and
telling them to go hang themselves. She is, in the language of Calvinism,
reprobrate.

Indeed, anxieties about Joan’s gender ambiguities cut across national
boundaries in 1 Henry VI. Although the play at times views the danger
of Joan’s sexuality as nationally inflected and a feature of her French
identity, the French men express equal scepticism about her ability to
be both martial and a maid. Just as the English characters instinctively
distrust Joan’s status as a virgin, the French courtiers respond to her
female masculinity with a series of bawdy puns. Introduced in Act 1 as
a ‘holy maid’ sent to ‘drive the English forth’, Joan overcomes two chal-
lenges designed to test the veracity of her prophecies (1.3.30; 1.3.33).
Recognising that Charles has sent René in his stead, Joan insists on a
private conference with the true Dauphin. While Joan engages in one-
on-one combat with Charles (proving herself by defeating him), René,
Alençon and the Bastard of Orleans look on and voice insinuations.
The phallic interplay, combined with the Dauphin’s subsequent propo-
sitioning of Joan, would be enough to cast doubt on Joan’s claim that
she ‘must not yield to any rites of love’ (1.3.92–3). As a self-avowed
virgin outside the confines of a nunnery on a Protestant stage, Joan
would have been undermined even without the play’s staging of her
martial feats. The play simply reinforces the dramatic spectacle’s sexual
overtones through the comments of the French courtiers. In response to
René’s observation that the conference has gone on for a considerable
amount of time, Alençon remarks, ‘Doubtless he shrives this woman to
her smock, / Else ne’er could he so long protract her speech’ (1.3.98–9).
Intimating that the Dauphin has begun the process of undressing Joan –
eliciting Protestant accusations about the misbehaviour of priests during
confession – Alençon goes on to associate women in general with sexual
seduction. ‘These women’, he says, ‘are shrewd tempters with their
tongues’ (1.3.102). Even though Joan’s virginity serves the interests of
the French, they, like the English, cannot quite imagine a form of female
identity that would allow for masculine behaviour without relegating it
to the category of the ‘whore’.

The doubts of Joan’s fellow characters prepare the audience for the
piece-by-piece dismantling of her self-fashioned identity. The trial scene
undoes Joan’s previous self-construction as ‘maid’ and identifies her as a ‘girl’, but it also exposes the unviability of femininity and femaleness in the world of Shakespeare’s history plays. As Joan invokes one defence after another, each based upon a protected class of female identity, she discovers no refuge, and no mercy; no form of femininity will save her from being burned as a witch. She begins by forsaking her shepherd father and denying her parentage, claiming instead to be descended from royalty in preparation for her first line of defence against being burnt as a witch – where she claims protection as the descendent of kings. The scene turns upon Joan’s refusal of her status as peasant ‘girl’ – the Shepherd calls her ‘my girl’ (5.6.25) – and the way that it reveals her to be an unruly, sexually unchaste ‘girl’, unworthy of her father’s blessing and worthy to be executed in the most painful way possible. Having previously described herself as a shepherdess, Joan now styles herself as noble, as if her vision of the Virgin Mary has entirely erased her biological origins and given her a claim to a new lineage. Insulting the Shepherd by calling him a ‘base ignoble wretch’ and claiming ‘gentler blood’, Joan orders him away and accuses the English of producing the man to impersonate her father to cast doubt upon her royal descent. For Warwick and York, however, her statement only casts further doubt upon her virtue, since it shows her to be an ungrateful child who is willing to impugn her mother’s virtue, since if the Shepherd is not her father, it makes her a bastard. The Shepherd, in turn, renounces Joan, calling her a ‘drab’ who deserves to have sucked ‘ratsbane’ at her mother’s teat or to have been eaten by a wolf in her infancy.

The reason that Joan refuses to acknowledge the shepherd as her father is precisely because she hopes to link her current status to the sexual innocence of infancy. In her initial defence, Joan attempts to capitalise on her virginity, declaring:

Joan of Arc hath been
A virgin from her tender infancy,
Chaste and immaculate in very thought,
Whose maiden-blood thus rigorously effused,
Will cry for vengeance at the gates of heaven.

(5.6.50–4)

As Theodora Jankowski points out, the historical Joan of Arc’s virginity prevented her from being condemned as a witch; though burned at the stake, Joan of Arc was crucially not burned for witchcraft because it was believed that a virgin could not be a witch. In Shakespeare’s play, however, Joan’s status as a virgin does not exculpate her, since the audience has already seen her communing with devils and since the only
repite offered in recompense for her virginity is a faster-burning fire that would kill her with less pain than a slow-burning one.

Significantly, it is only when the special status of Joan’s virginity fails as a defence that she turns to motherhood and pregnancy. In this play, virginity, real or dissembled, does not exempt a female character from punishments for transgressing the gendered boundaries of politics and war. As in Master F. J., the contained feminine position offers no practical advantage. With the failure of her virginal power, Joan turns to motherhood as a means of claiming a special legal status, but, as we have seen, this too backfires. She finds no mercy. Having been written out of the role of virgin, Joan embraces her girlhood, and leaves the stage cursing the English. The female sexuality lurking behind her masculine actions ultimately makes her more dangerous and anxiety-provoking than masculinity alone. Whereas Gascoigne’s tale did not represent girlish behaviour as resulting in negative consequences, Shakespeare’s play makes clear that inhabiting the category of the ‘girl’ brought with it the promise of power but also the threat of punishment. As important as it is to recognise that ‘girlish’ behaviour could facilitate sexual and social transgressions, it could also sometimes be severely punished. Elinor’s girlishness goes unpunished because it remains invisible, whereas the public and spectacular nature of Joan’s performative girlhood prompts the mechanisms of the repressive state apparatus to destroy her. Shakespeare roots Joan in a masculine world in which womanly femininity does not seem to exist, and no alternative female exemplum appears. If being constituted as a socially viable being requires recognition, that very recognition carries dangers and consequences. As Judith Butler points out, ‘There are advantages to remaining less than intelligible, if intelligibility is understood as that which is produced as a consequence of recognition according to prevailing social norms.’ Joan attempts to claim recognition within prevailing norms, and finds no space within which to lead a livable life. Being a French female seems to be enough to make her reprobate.

III

Joan is nonetheless a dramatically compelling character, and for all the play’s condemnation, she seems importantly to be an even more disruptive girl than Elinor. Elinor may provoke anxiety, but Joan produces powerful effects within the play and on the stage. In both The Adventures of Master F. J. and 1 Henry VI, girlishness can only be sustained when it is hidden and undiscovered (at least within the diegetic
framework). Once detected in the former, Gascoigne’s narrator hints that his female readers should condemn it and eschew such behaviour themselves, and once detected in the latter, repressive state apparatuses swing into action and try to destroy it. The dramatic reality of execution in 1 Henry VI becomes a linguistic trace in Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker’s play The Roaring Girl. The language of death and hanging haunts Sir Alexander Wengrave’s threats against the roaring girl, Moll Cutpurse. The real-life cross-dresser Mary Frith whose notoriety inspired the play eventually faced punishment in Bridewell, but the festive tone of Middleton and Dekker’s drama overshadows the potential dangers of early modern girlhood. The play represents Moll’s critics as the ones needing to undergo a personal transformation to appreciate her worth. Unlike Gascoigne’s tale, which criticises girlish behaviour even as it represents the potential drawbacks of womanly behaviour, and unlike 1 Henry VI, which punishes Joan’s unwomanly actions, The Roaring Girl embraces Moll Cutpurse’s girlish eccentricities.

Mary Frith in both her fictional and historical guises has proven as fascinating for contemporary scholars as she was for Renaissance readers and audiences. Having enjoyed critical popularity since the late 1980s, The Roaring Girl and the life of the historical personage of Mary Frith have received attention from critics who have categorised Moll as a transvestite, an hermaphrodite, a masculine woman and a male actor. As a female character engaging in masculine behaviour and wearing men’s clothing, Moll systematically defies classification, to the dismay and sometimes to the delight of her fellow characters. As Sir Alexander complains, ‘One knows not how to name’ her (1.2.129). The closest the play comes, it seems, is to label her a roaring ‘girl’, a terminological choice that makes sense in light of the cultural association between girlhood and transgression in the early seventeenth century. The initial debate about the play centred around whether Moll’s cross-dressing subverted or reinforced the existing social order, although more recent criticism has focused on the play’s class politics, representations of criminality, and its urban setting. My own reading of the play suggests that the potential for agency opened up by the discourse of girlhood had a complicated relationship to the ability of actual female human beings to exercise power within early modern society.

In the face of a prevailing ideology that sought to root out girlhood and transform it into womanhood, Middleton and Dekker enable Moll to act like a girl openly on the stage. I want to use the character of Moll to demonstrate the way that constructions of girlishness as a model of femininity were contextually specific. ‘Girlhood’ throughout early modern culture seems to have carried connotations of unruliness and
transgressive behaviour, but the forms that the girls’ transgressions took were particular and varied according to class, genre, place and historical moment. For a contemporary feminist, using girlhood to fragment the category of ‘women’ carries with it the risk of reifying ‘girls’, as if ‘girlhood’ were a stable, uncontested category out of which ‘womanhood’ could be formulated. By putting *The Roaring Girl* side by side with *The Adventures of Master F. J.* and *1 Henry VI*, we can see that not all girl characters in early modern literature looked alike. The discourse of girlhood could describe Italian adulteresses, martial French maids or London cross-dressers; ‘girls’ might be demonic or virtuous, whorish or chaste. If girlhood was a way to figure masculinities and femininities as socially coded behaviours rather than biological essences (as doings rather than beings), the behaviours grouped under those categories were contested and shifting.

With this Jacobean city comedy, we see a significant departure from the two previous Elizabethan texts. *The Roaring Girl* takes us from the aristocratic battlefields of the history play to the hustle and bustle of merchant-class London, with citizen wives, destitute landed gentry and canting thieves. Portraying an urban environment and writing after the late Elizabethan vogue for cross-dressed heroines in comedies, Middleton and Dekker were more likely to represent Moll’s cross-dressing in a sympathetic light. Like Joan, Moll Cutpurse’s girlishness relates to her performance of masculinity; she dresses in men’s apparel, smokes tobacco, engages in swordplay and cants with local thieves, and this brand of female masculinity marks her as a member of London’s youth culture. As Stephen Orgel points out, the roaring girl offers the female complement to the roaring boy, the aristocratic son who frequents taverns, squanders money and causes general social upheaval. For Orgel, Moll becomes doubly subversive because she changes not only gender roles but also class positions as she assumes the habit and financial privileges of a man with money. The roaring boy, on the other hand, would generally be associated with his dependence on a father, like the character of the prodigal son Jack Dapper in the play. In contrast, Moll is financially independent and unapprenticed. Oddly enough, the thief Trapdoor is the person who most explicitly lays claim to the title of ‘roaring boy’, declaring that as a ‘roaring boy’ he will be the one to ‘put[] down’ the ‘Roaring Girl’ (1.2.248). This pairing of roaring boys and girls, via prodigal sons and thieves, is symptomatic of the general association between youth and rebellion in early modern English culture. Disorderly behaviour was not associated just with roarers, but with youth more broadly, as can be seen clearly in a remark made by Jack Dapper’s page Gull. Disappointed with the three half-
pence allowance that his master gives him for his meal, Gull complains that his master has spent three pounds the night before ‘amongst girls and brave bawdy-house boys’ (2.1.129). Even when the speaker dispenses with the modifier ‘roaring’, ‘girls’ and ‘boys’ were unruly figures in Jacobean London.

Within the play, nobody succeeds in putting down Moll, and her triumph lies in her ability to be translated between multiple gender identities, not only ‘girl’ but also ‘woman’ and ‘man’. The central romantic plot of the play revolves around the engagement of Mary Fitzallard and Sebastian Wengrave. Because Sebastian’s father Sir Alexander Wengrave disapproves of the match, Sebastian devises a scheme to convince his father that he has transferred his affection from Mary to Moll Cutpurse, the Roaring Girl. The plan hinges on the assumption that his father will be so grateful when his son agrees not to marry a transvestite that he will consent to the original marriage, and the plan ultimately succeeds at the end of the play after Sebastian enlists Moll’s help. In the end, Sebastian and Mary obtain Sir Alexander’s consent, and Sir Alexander comes to respect and appreciate Moll Cutpurse’s virtues. But along the way he acts as her harshest critic, and he and the other characters voice anxieties about the way she disrupts gender and social categories.

The failure of gender categories to account for Moll typifies her particular form of girlishness. The ‘girling’ of Moll within the play depends not on age or dependency but on her exhibition of a particular kind of gendered behaviour, one linked inextricably to the world of Jacobean city comedy, a world of urban youth culture where Moll is specifically a roaring girl and not a roaring woman. Moll shows us ‘girlishness’ as resistance to fixed gender categories; that is, girlhood in this play is not associated with a set of behaviours, so much as transgression and transformation itself. Moll has a way of making gendered terms look like sets of behaviours that do not necessarily have to be organised into separate binaries, calling social and cultural hierarchies into question. The other characters constantly attempt to categorise Moll and stabilise her identity, but their labels keep shifting. In the words of the citizen wife Mistress Gallipot, ‘Some will not stick to say she’s a man, and some both man and woman’ (2.1.209–11). Her fellow characters can never settle on a single label. Moll ‘will not stick to’ one of the usual gender categories used to classify adults as men and women, causing no end of frustration and excitement. Her hybrid gender identity – highlighted by her initial appearance in a frieze jerkin and a black woman’s safeguard – makes her not a man and not a woman, leading Sir Alexander to view her as inhuman – ‘a creature’ that ‘nature hath brought forth / To mock the sex of woman’ (1.2.127–8). I would suggest that she does exactly
that: she mocks the idea that there is a stable, monolithic category of ‘woman’ that can be constructed out of the multiple lived relations of female characters in the play.

Others have explored Moll’s sexuality, but I am less interested in her erotic potential than in her social location within the landscape of Jacobean London. The play self-consciously positions her outside the categories of ‘maid’ and ‘wife’. She plays an alternative female role located somewhere between the marriageable maid Mary Fitzallard and the already married citizen wives but outside of a marital trajectory. The costuming, plot and language all conspire to set up Mary and Moll as dramatic foils. The two characters share a name (Sebastian calls Mary by the nickname ‘Moll’ in the first scene), and the feigned substitution of the roaring girl for the ‘sweet maid’ in Sebastian’s affections furthers the connection (1.1.178). Mary, like Moll, changes her clothing several times during the play, appearing first as a seamstress and then cross-dressed and disguised as a page in order to fool Sir Alexander. The pretend substitution of Moll for Mary during the wedding scene puts the final touch on a series of events designed to provoke comparisons and contrasts between the two unmarried female characters. It can be tempting in the face of Moll’s charisma to dismiss Mary Fitzallard as a pale, feminine shadow of a character, but Mary displays a certain amount of assertiveness in her own right. Her adoption of various disguises in order to achieve her goals prevents her from being a mere pawn in her marriage negotiations; indeed, her father plays a rather cursory role in the affair and in the play in general. The other characters do consistently refer to her as a ‘damsel’ or ‘maid’, which sets her against Moll, the play’s ‘girl’ or ‘wench’. Whereas Mary lives under the authority of her father, Moll has no father; whereas Mary cross-dresses as a disguise, Moll cross-dresses as herself; whereas Mary’s disruption of gender boundaries occurs in the service of securing the position of wife, Moll’s is in the service of remaining single. Although Moll consents to help orchestrate the marriage of Mary and Sebastian, she rejects marriage for herself and instead embraces the single life. ‘I have the head now of myself,’ she says, ‘and am man enough for a woman’ (2.2.42–3). Rather than give up the freedom of her girlish identity, Moll chooses to remain unmarried, and in fact offers a biting critique of the institution of marriage: ‘Marriage is but a chopping and changing, where a maiden loses one head, and has a worse i’th place’ (2.2.43–4). To keep her own head, Moll risks the potential dangers of being a single girl and resists becoming a marriageable maiden.

Why then does Moll help bring about the marriage of Sebastian and Mary? Moll claims to have ‘p pitied’ Mary ‘for name’s sake, that a Moll /
Should be so crossed in love’ (4.1.66–7). As Jean E. Howard points out, the generic conventions of comedy demand that the play end in marriage, but while the play gives us a marriage between a Mary and a man, that Mary is not the Roaring Girl.62 What seems particularly subversive about The Roaring Girl is that it gives us both Mary and Moll and refuses to choose between them; Moll’s particular brand of masculine femininity or feminine masculinity encompasses female solidarity, and the play suggests that multiple kinds of gender identities can and should be socially viable. Moll’s objection to marriage is not to marriage per se, but the social reality of marital power relations in her world. Her speeches recognise the material constraints within which women function in her society, and Moll seeks to open up, rather than close down, options for other female characters. The play ultimately teaches the characters, and through them the audience, to appreciate Moll’s singularity. The character Moll also has a lesson to teach contemporary feminist scholars about there being space for two female characters in a play worthy of feminist analysis. Moll as a character explicitly insists that her girlish behaviour, though admirable, is not the only viable female identity.

Initially heralded as a revolutionary figure, however, Moll has come to be viewed as less disruptive than once thought. Critics like Jane Baston and Deborah Jacobs argue that the play renders Moll unthreatening by portraying her girlishness as paradoxically maintaining the existing social order.63 Instead of being a criminal, Moll helps bring criminals to justice; instead of being sexually incontinent, Moll maintains her chastity and punishes men who would make women their fond, flexible whores. For a critic like Baston, the positive portrayal of Moll Cutpurse as an upholder of social order ultimately undoes her challenge to the social hierarchy. She laments that by the end of the play Moll can be ‘dismissed as a “good wench” . . . a description that subsumes Moll into existing class and gender hierarchies and so ensures her rehabilitation into the existing patriarchy’. In response to the playwrights’ claims that they have made Moll better in the play than in nature, Baston asks, ‘For whom is Moll’s reformation better?’64 In response to Baston’s query, Alicia Tomlinson has written that she believes ‘the playwrights would answer, better for Moll’. She argues that the fictional image of Moll would have helped the real-life roaring girl to craft ‘her public persona and use[] her celebrity to wield power’ because the play ‘celebrates her reputations and disparages rumor, validating Moll as an expert of the underworld while denying her participation in its crime’.65 I would add that these paradoxes effectively undo the fixity of gender binaries and blur the distinctions between the criminal and the legal, the sexual
and the chaste, the manly and the womanly. What is most important for my argument is that Moll, like girlhood in general, denaturalises these categories and makes them socially and culturally contingent. She not only disrupts any easy alignment between biological sex and gendered behaviour; she undoes the stability of gender as a fixed category and turns it into a contingent, relational position. As Kate Bornstein describes it in Gender Outlaw, the desire for transsexuality for some involves the desire for transformation itself, and I would analogise Moll’s description of herself as a desire for a continual state of transformation.66

Whether or not Moll’s portrayal on the Fortune stage ultimately subverts the social order as a whole, it argues against a social mandate of gender uniformity. As the Prologue makes clear in its taxonomy of the ‘tribe’ of roaring girls, there is more than one way to act like a girl:

I see attention sets wide ope her gates
Of hearing, and with covetous listening waits
To know what girl this roaring girl should be—
For of that tribe are many. One is she
That roars at midnight in deep tavern bowls,
That beats the watch, and constables controls;
Another roars i’the’ day-time, swears, stabs, gives braves,
Yet sells her soul to the lust of fools and slaves:
Both these are suburb-roarers. Then there’s besides
A civil, city-roaring girl, whose pride,
Feasting, and riding, shakes her husband’s state,
And leaves him roaring through an iron grate.
None of these roaring girls is ours: she flies
With wings more lofty. Thus her character lies—

(Prologue 13–26)

By further splintering the category of femininity and imagining multiple types of roaring girls, the prologue presents girlishness as a set of performed behaviours rather than innate impulses. One girl may carouse in taverns at night and physically abuse the constables; another may provoke unrest through prostitution; while still another city-dwelling girl may land her husband in debtors’ prison through extravagant expenditures. Moll is none of these; she is a superior roaring girl. Middleton and Dekker’s dramatic defence of Moll intervenes in contemporary debates about femininity and describes girlishness as a set of performative choices. Moll consciously chooses to act like a roaring girl, and she chooses to act like a particular type of roaring girl. This passage suggests that girls like Moll fly with loftier wings than those who allow themselves to be defined as womanly or unwomanly. Thus The Roaring Girl renders girlhood sustainable as well as desirable. In some ways, a text like The Roaring Girl seems to provide an imaginative if cursory
early modern answer to Judith Butler’s question about what makes a life livable. In *Undoing Gender*, Butler distinguishes between a ‘minimal biological form of living’ necessary to sustain life and the kind of livable life that enables people to be endowed with human rights. She writes, ‘In the same way that a life for which no categories of recognition exist is not a livable life, so a life for which those categories constitute unlivable constraint is not an acceptable option.’ For Butler, to ‘minimize the possibility’ of people living ‘unbearable’ lives, we need to stop ‘legislating for all lives what is livable only for some, and similarly, to refrain from proscribing for all lives what is unlivable for some’. The social recognition of Moll’s identity as viable undoes the insistence that we saw from the mother in the jest with which this chapter began that the female sex enjoins only one kind of behaviour. As such, the play takes a small step toward expanding the kinds of lives acknowledged as human.

Whether or not actual early modern women found access to transgressive girlhood to be empowering is a more difficult question. The real-life Mary Frith certainly gained notoriety and may, as Tomlinson suggests, have been able to take advantage of her fame. But her girlish behaviour also got her into legal trouble. A now-infamous entry in the Consistory Court of London Correction Book reveals that Mary Frith’s unruliness resulted in her being forced to do penance at Paul’s Cross:

This day & place the said Mary appeared personally & then & there voluntarily confessed that she had long frequented all or most of the disorderly & licentious places in this City as namely she hath usually in the habit of a man resorted to alehouses, taverns, tobacco shops & also to playhouses, there to see plays & prizes & namely being at a play about 3 quarters of a year since at the Fortune in man’s apparel & in her boots & with a sword by her side, she told the company there present that she thought many of them were of the opinion that she was a man, but if any of them would come to her lodging they should find that she is a woman & some other immodest & lascivious speeches she also used at that time. And also sat there upon the stage in the public view of all the people there present in man’s apparel & played upon her lute & sang a song.

Critics have debated exactly what happened when Mary Frith took the stage, but while it might be titillating to imagine that she might have played herself, what does seem clear is that at some point after the play was written, Mary Frith ended up in Bridewell and was only released after confessing to licentiousness, declaring herself ‘heartily sorry’ for her actions and promising to behave ‘honestly, soberly, & womanly’ in the future. That promise to behave ‘womanly’ resonates quite strongly as a pledge to give up her girlish ways, but she did, however, insist that she had never been a bawd nor been ‘dishonest of her body’. And yet
even with an historical source such as the Correction Book it is hard to separate the real Mary Frith out from her performance, since a letter from John Chamberlain dated 11 February 1611 (Old Style) casts doubt on her sincerity. Chamberlain writes:

This last Sunday Moll Cutpurse, a notorious baggage, that used to go in man’s apparel, and challenged the field of diverse gallants was brought to the same place [Paul’s Cross], where she wept bitterly and seemed very penitent; but it is since doubted she was maudlin drunk, being discovered to have tippel’d of three quarts of sack before she came to her penance.70

While it is gratifying from a modern perspective to think of Moll refusing to capitulate and repent, such behaviour could have brought about her demise. It is important to remember that girlish behaviour, for all that it may have conferred agency on fictional characters, could bring about real, negative consequences.

In practice, early modern women would not have been entirely in control over their status as girls. In most cases, their gendered position would have required that they negotiate with existing ideologies using similar techniques to those that Ann Rosalind Jones describes in her study of early modern women poets. Adapting the three ‘viewer’ positions that Stuart Hall has defined as being available in contemporary media, Jones describes the relationship between women writers and the dominant tradition as engaging with imitation, negotiation and appropriation. Imitation, defined as the adoption of a ‘dominant/hegemonic’ position, involves ‘receiv[ing] and reproducing a public text obediently’.71 To attempt to become the ideal woman described in Vives, for example, would be to attempt imitation. Appropriation, on the other hand, amounts to outright rejection of those standards; it entails taking ‘an oppositional position from which the ideological message and force of the reigning code is rearticulated, that is, pulled out of its dominant frame of reference and subversively inserted into an “alternative frame of reference”’.72 The girl in the jest with which I began this chapter offers perhaps the best example of girlish appropriation that I have found with her jest that men should, in fact, be subordinate to women. Dekker and Middleton’s positive portrayal of Moll, on the other hand, seeks to negotiate a position for female agency within existing social constructions of gender. A negotiated position is, in Jones’s words, ‘one that accepts the dominant ideology encoded into a text but particularizes and transforms it in the service of a different group’.73 That is to say, negotiation holds together the oppositions inherent in competing definitions of femininity and dramatises the push and pull between them.

What all three of the texts I have been examining have in common
is that they make it impossible to uphold a simple masculine/feminine binary. The construction of girlhood in these texts provides a discursive apparatus for imagining femininities as multiple and contingent, rather than singular or innate. If Gascoigne and Shakespeare demonise the choices of their female characters at times, they also refuse to represent womanliness as entirely positive, and Middleton and Dekker turn the negative model of femininity on its head, suggesting that acting like a girl can sometimes be more worthwhile and admirable than acting like a woman or a maiden. As these characters have shown, refusing to be a woman could sometimes mean performing girlhood, a concept that remains powerful and pervasive in our own culture. Like all discourses, the discourse of girlhood was fluid and contested, and it could be harnessed to subvert patriarchal social relations and to shore them up. The category of the ‘girl’ was available to imagine complex female identities, but it could also be rewritten as a less powerful, unthreatening category.

Moreover, many early modern women would not have wanted to embrace girlishness and some would have experienced being ‘girled’ as a negative experience. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century women writers do not seem to have engaged as freely with the discourse of girlhood as men. I am reluctant to make generalisations about the differences between men’s and women’s representations of girls because the sample size of women’s texts is so much smaller, and their texts are written in a rather wide range of genres. I also do not want to homogenise the variety of female voices out there in a way that suggests women’s writing offers a monolithic vision of female childhood. However, until the Restoration, the term ‘girl’ is relatively rare in extant women’s texts. Of the 172 texts included in the electronic database Renaissance Women Online, only six texts that were written or published prior to 1660 include the word ‘girl’ (in any of its spelling variations): Isabella Whitney’s A Sweet Nosegay, Or Pleasant Posy: Containing a Hundred and Ten Philosophical Flowers (1573), Mary Tattlewell’s The Women’s Sharp Revenge (1640), Anne Bradstreet’s The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America (1650), Mary Cary’s The Little Horns Doom and Downfall (1651), Elizabeth Grey, Countess of Kent’s recipe book A Choice Manual, or Rare and Select Secrets (1653), and Margaret Cavendish’s play Nature’s Pictures (1651). To this list I can add Jane Lumley’s translation of Iphigenia at Aulis, which uses the term one time. To put that in perspective, a complete search of the 172 texts in the database yields 145 hits in forty-three texts, the bulk of which were written for the Restoration stage by Margaret Cavendish or Mary Pix. Those statistics might look slightly different if Renaissance Women Online included women’s manuscripts, but my own experience reading
women’s manuscripts suggests that it was not until women started writing for the professional stage that the discourse of girlhood became prominent in women’s writing. Pre-Restoration women also strike me as less likely to associate girlhood with gender transgression and more likely to figure it as an age category. My sense is that this trend results from a combination of factors: the limited range of women’s texts (the term ‘girl’ shows up most frequently, even in the Restoration period, in public drama), the writers’ class statuses (young aristocratic girls are referred to as ‘ladies’ in letters and court masques), their focus on familial connections (they discuss ‘daughters’ rather than ‘girls’), and the religious nature of many of the texts that women left behind. Except for those by Isabella Whitney, all the pre-1660 uses of ‘girl’ or ‘girls’ by women writers refer explicitly to female children rather than adult women engaging in girlish behaviour.

The presence of girls in Whitney’s poem likewise reinforces the term’s association with the lower classes. Scholarship on the woman who published the first original volume of poetry in English has been attuned to Whitney’s status as a discharged servant as far back as Betty Travitsky’s 1980 article that introduced many literary critics to Whitney’s work. Although she is identified as a ‘gentlewoman’ on the title page, the content of the volume makes it clear that she is out of work and publishing her poems because she needs the money, being ‘whole in body, and in mind, / but very weake in Purse’ (lines 1–2). Patricia Phillipy has explored the way that Whitney’s poetic description of service speaks to the experience of country women who migrated to London for work and who were compellable to serve yet faced uncertainties with regard to employment. In her most well-known poem the ‘Wyll’, Whitney brilliantly plays on will-writing conventions to lay claim to the material space of London and the wealth contained within, leaving the city itself as her executor.

In both Whitney’s uses of the term ‘girl’, she displays an awareness of economic necessity. In the first instance, she associates girlhood with illicit sexuality, but it is not an illicit sexuality that results from conscious rebellion. Instead, Whitney evokes the world of the ‘poor shifting sisters’ whom the character Moll Frith describes as deserving sympathy rather than condemnation (3.1.100). In her description of the city, Whitney includes the young workers who cannot wed because their apprenticeships require them to be single and who, as a result, seek sexual satisfaction with prostitutes:

And handsome men, that must not wed except they leaue their trade. They oft shal seeke for proper Gyrls
and some perhaps shall fynde:
(That neede compels, or lucre lurss
to satisfye their mind.)

(lines 115–20)

The ironised use of ‘proper’ in the above passage plays on the prostitutes’ divergence from propriety even as they technically fulfil their ‘proper’ sexual roles in a heteronormative society. The poem’s narrator recognises that some of those girls are drawn into the sex trade because of need, and that some of the girls simply give in to the lure of lucre. For some sex workers, girlishness is a choice, whereas for others, it is a necessity. Because of the demands of poverty, not all adult women have the ability to behave in the womanly fashion so lauded by conduct manuals. The narrator’s awareness of social inequality leads her to hope for cross-class marriages that will work as a de facto means of redistributing wealth from rich widows to young men and from rich men to poor girls:

For Maydens poore, I Widdoers ritch,
do leaue, that oft shall dote:
And by that meanes shal mary them,
To set the Girles afote.
And wealthy Widoweres wil I leaue,
to help yong Gentylmen:

(lines 201–6)

Because of this attempt to redistribute wealth, Crystal Bartolovich has described Whitney as a proto-Leveller whose utopian vision imagines a world in which social wealth was shared according to need.79

The key for us as today’s critics is that we do not assume that we know in advance what ‘girlishness’ means, not only because the meaning has changed since the early modern period but also because ‘girlhood’ has multiple and unstable meanings. Feminists seeking to refuse patriarchal positions as ‘women’ can tap into a discourse of girlhood, but that same discourse can be used by anti-feminists seeking to reclaim girlhood as a patriarchal category. And the very subversive potential of girlhood can become marketing tools as watered-down versions of ‘Girl Power’ that promise young women liberation through lipstick and sparkling T-shirts. In our multiplicities of girlhood, we are in many ways facing a similar but historically specific contestation over gender ideologies. Our language bears traces of the idea that acting like a girl is what makes you one. From signifying female friendship by calling each other ‘girl’ to indulging in a ‘girls’ night out’, we continue to associate certain behaviours with girlishness. The principal difference lies in our direct
association of those behaviours with the freedoms enjoyed within childhood communities. In the early modern period, performative girlhood was largely constructed as an adult privilege. Perhaps the best contemporary analogue of the unruly potential embedded in the category of the ‘girl’ would be feminist groups like the Guerrilla Girls or the Riot Grrrl musical movement of the 1990s. Although in some contexts being called a ‘girl’ can be infantilising, calling oneself a ‘girl’ can constitute a refusal of modern femininity and the gendered baggage that goes along with being categorised as a woman in our society. One might say, to reformulate Simone de Beauvoir’s insightful comment, that if one is not born a woman, one is also not born a girl. My next chapter accordingly focuses on the ‘girling’ of female infants and the process through which being born with a female body would have set off the contingent processes through which female human beings were shaped into various female subject positions through lived encounters with their social world.

Notes

6. Judith Butler, _Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity_ (New York: Routledge, 1990); see especially p. 5 where she remarks, ‘Feminist critique ought also to understand how the category of “women,” the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought.’
10. See, for example, Thomas Becon, who repeatedly uses this phrase in his 1564 _A New Catechisme sette forth in Dialogue wise in familiare talke between the father and son_, in _The Catechism of Thomas Becon_, ed. John Ayre, Parker Society Reprint (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968). See also Robert Cleaver’s command that ‘fathers and mothers do instruct and bring up their children euen from the cradle, in the fear and nurture of the Lord’ in _A Godly Form of Household Government_ (London, 1598), p. 346.
14. Elizabeth Isham, _Book of Remembrance_, MS RTC01 no. 62, Robert H. Taylor Collection, Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Harvey S. Firestone Library, Princeton University, fol. 2v. I am using Alice Eardley’s transcription on the website ‘Constructing Elizabeth Isham’, <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/ren/projects/isham> (accessed 27 June 2012).
24. As I discuss later, Shakespeare’s Joan la Pucelle inflects her transgressions
of gender not only through wearing masculine attire, but also by claiming aristocratic class privilege as a peasant ‘girl’ seeking to be a ‘holy maid’. As a lowly shepherdess, Joan would otherwise have been excluded from the educational programme imagined by Vives.

27. Lucy Hutchinson’s precocity provides an historical case study of the rapidity with which girls could learn. Hutchinson reports, ‘I was so apt that I outstript my brothers who were at school, although my father’s chaplain that was my tutor was a pitifull dull fellow. My brothers, who had a great deal of wit, had some emulation at the progress I made in my learning, which very well pleased my father, though my mother would have been contented I had not so wholly addicted myself to that as to neglect my other qualities.’ Quoted in Nancy McMullen, ‘Education of English Gentlewomen’, *History of Education* 6 (1977), p. 99.
29. Ibid. p. 12.
34. *Hic Mulier, or, the Man-Woman* (London, 1620) and *Haec Vir, or, The Womanish Man* (London, 1620).
36. Roy Eriksen has suggested that this move represents a deliberate break with the preceding alliterative pairings. For Eriksen, this is an example of the novella’s Italian mannerist style, which he characterises as marked by a transgressive aesthetics that defies our expectations of form. See his ‘The Mimesis of Change: Gascoigne’s *Adventures of Master F. J.* (1573)’, in Eriksen (ed.), *Contexts of Pre-Novel Narrative: The European Tradition* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994), p. 208. If this is a conscious decision on the part of Gascoigne (though not the narrator), it furthers my argument that the text both raises expectations that Frances will triumph and then undermines those expectations.
40. Gascoigne justifies this move as follows: ‘And because I do suppose that Leonora is the same name whiche wee call Elinor in English, and that
Francischina also doth import none other than Fraunces, I will so entitle them as to our on countriemen may be moste perspicuous.’ See *The Posies*, sig. R1v.


42. This is true of both Pigman’s edition, which provides textual variations between *Master F. J.* and *The Pleasant Fable* throughout the footnotes, and Paul Salzman’s edition in *An Anthology of Elizabethan Prose Fiction*, which includes an addendum with the alternate ending.

43. ‘His claim to have cleaned up the book’, writes Felicity A. Hughes, ‘is consistently undermined by ironies, jokes, and patent bare-faced lies.’ See Hughes, ‘Gascoigne’s Poses’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 37 (1997), p. 2. Hughes points to the obviously fictitious claim that *The Pleasant Fable* is a translation from Bartello and to the multiple insinuations that Bartello is Gascoigne in other places in *The Posies*. She argues that instead of reading *The Posies* as a genuine attempt to appease the censors and reform his writing, we should see it as an ironic pose meant to use humour to defuse possible objections. G. W. Pigman III agrees. ‘Gascoigne’, he writes, ‘is mocking the reverend divines with ungelded, but plausibly deniable, puns.’ Their arguments are supported by the fact that we have records of Her Majesty’s High Commission seizing copies of the 1575 volume. See Pigman, ‘Editing Revised Texts’, p. 7. I agree with both Hughes and Pigman, but my argument does not hinge on Gascoigne’s intentions. Whether or not his pose is genuine and whether he means for the tale to work as a moral, I would argue that it fails to do so.


45. Ibid. sig. S2v.


47. Ibid. p. 61.


50. Ibid. p. 44.


52. Ibid. p. 12.

53. As several critics have noted, the very act of cross-dressing would have linked Joan with witchcraft, and Edward Hall describes her wearing of armour as a sign of her status as a witch. See Gabrielle Bernard Jackson, ‘Topical Ideology: Witches, Amazons, and Shakespeare’s Joan of Arc’, *English Literary Renaissance* (1988), pp. 40–65, and Howard and Rackin, *Engendering a Nation*, p. 45.

54. See Tamburlaine’s declaration, ‘I that am termed the scourge and wrath of God, / The only fear and terror of the world, / Will first subdue the Turk and then enlarge / Those Christian captives which you keep as slaves’


58. For an account of Moll as a single woman (though not specifically her position as a girl), see Adrienne L. Eastwood, ‘Controversy and the Single Woman in *The Maid’s Tragedy* and *The Roaring Girl*, *The Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 58 (2004), pp. 7–27.


69. For an account of the debate over the real woman’s appearance on the Fortune stage, see Mark Hutchings, ‘Mary Frith at the Fortune’, *Early Theatre* 10 (2007), pp. 89–108.


72. Ibid. pp. 5–6.

73. Ibid. p. 4.

74. *Renaissance Women Online*, Women Writers Project, Brown University, <http://www.wwp.brown.edu> (accessed 30 October 2011). I have excluded the play Swetnam, The Woman-Hater, Arraigned by Women (1620), because as a play written for the public stage, it may be of relevance to students of women’s literature but was not written by a woman.


