

## The Spenser Review



**Caroline Bicks.** *Cognition and Girlhood in Shakespeare's World: Rethinking Female Adolescence.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 300 pp. ISBN 9781108844215. \$99.99 hardback.

*Cognition and Girlhood in Shakespeare's World: Rethinking Female Adolescence* attends precisely to girls, and particularly to their brains, as they undergo the sun-brightened blossoming of a pubescence as imagined by the English early moderns. In this book, Caroline Bicks offers a thorough and persuasive rethinking of the prevailing scholarly approaches to premodern understanding of the female body and its health. The familiar narrative, based upon classical humoral theories and developed in numerous early modern medical texts, figures an anatomy of cold and sluggish fluids and brains that produce weak animal spirits and render the body damage prone and cognitively deficient. Bicks maps out a new story of a vigorous girlhood animated by a brain expansively, even explosively, engaged with the world. Analyzing the stories created by writers and illustrators of fictional, pseudo-historical, and real girls, Bicks gathers her evidence from an extensive range of writings, ranging from medical texts, histories, mythographies, and autobiographies, to poems, prayers, and plays. The striking discovery of this book is the marvelous, if grievously temporary, space of freedom and agency granted to girls within the rigid Protestant teleology of female development from maid to mother: that space between the age of fourteen and marriage, where female adolescents might enjoy minds “materially expressed through the newly agile and industrious brainwork brought on by the changes of puberty,” and which “seemed boundless in their new-enlivened capabilities” (5).

*Cognition and Girlhood in Shakespeare's World* argues that girls, uniquely, seen to be endowed with mental gifts granted them by menarche, not only assess, imagine, and invent ways to create flourishing futures for themselves, but contribute to their communities, using their memories to “store up their countries’ and their

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families' histories, and bear witness to individual and communal traumas" (5). These functions, as Bicks goes on to show, were especially urgent in an England enduring the ongoing upheavals of the Protestant Reformation. Indeed, her argument rests on the significant premise of an early English imaginary that attributes an agency to female brainwork that is consequential, if not momentous, not only for the individual but for society at large: a potential that served as "a lightning rod for some of the period's most vital epistemological debates about the body and soul, [...] God and the material universe – and the place and agency of human perception in the midst of it all" (7).

This project engages with the scholarship in two fields: Girlhood (or Girls') Studies, more about which following, and studies of early modern embodied cognition, contributing productively to both particularly by working directly at their intersection. Bicks situates her inquiry into female cognition by positing the phenomenology of perception as theorized by philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, which can be seen to have seeded the work associated with a cognitive turn in early modern studies in works including Bruce R. Smith's *The Key of Green: Passion and Perception in Renaissance Culture* (2008), editors Mary Floyd-Wilson's and Garrett A. Sullivan Jr.'s collection of essays, *Environment and Embodiment in Early Modern England* (2007), Mary Thomas Crane's *Shakespeare's Brain: Reading with Cognitive Theory* (2001), and Michael C. Schoenfeldt's *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton* (1999). Bicks further makes considered use of Evelyn B. Tribble's and Nicholas Keene's work on individual and collective memory through theories of distributed cognition and extended mind as developed in their book, *Cognitive Ecologies and the History of Remembering: Religion, Education and Memory in Early Modern England* (2011); and she adopts for her project the key term *body-mind*, as "re-cognized" in an earlier work edited by Tribble along with Laurie Johnson and John Sutton, *Embodied Cognition and Shakespeare's Theatre: The Early Modern Body-Mind* (2014). But she also points out that the category consistently left behind in these and the many other rich studies of cognition is gender. In light of this, she argues that the surge of research on the boy actors who played girls and women "has contributed to the modern critical erasure of girls' minds, body-minds, and brainwork, not just from the early modern stage, but from early modern culture more broadly" (26). *Brainwork* is a term not in common use in cognitive theory nor in the English language generally, as Bicks points out, but brainwork of the female sort is her theme in a nutshell. As she explains, she uses it "to

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emphasize the industrious quality of girls' mental processes, and to signal [her] attention to the *mind* part of the body-mind equation" (3).

The key question that animates Bicks's investigation of the force of a girl's cognitive activities thus concerns how early modern writers and illustrators imagined a girl's brainwork to operate and to affect the world around her. Bicks's answers are in part prompted and informed by the expanding field of Girlhood Studies, its genesis inspired by feminist scholarship, and related, in addition, to Childhood Studies. Foundational feminist scholarship on women, but not necessarily girls, includes Juliet Dusinberre's *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* (1975) and Dympna Callaghan's *Shakespeare Without Women: Representing Gender and Race on the Renaissance Stage* (2000); and on childhood in English Literature, Leah S. Marcus, *Childhood and Cultural Despair: A Theme and its Variations in Seventeenth-Century Literature* (1978). Studies training a narrower lens on girlhood include books by Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters* (1983); Marjorie Garber, *Coming of Age in Shakespeare* (1981); Jennifer Higginbotham, *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Sisters: Gender, Transgression, Adolescence* (2013); and essays by Kate Chedgzoy, "Did Children Have a Renaissance?" in *Early Modern Women* (2013) and Diane Purkiss, "Fractious: Teenage Girls' Tales in and out of Shakespeare," in *Oral Traditions and Gender in Early Modern Literary Texts*, edited by Mary Ellen Lamb and Karen Bamford (2008). Bicks is an experienced scholar, and her work in the fields of feminist and childhood studies include, along with Jennifer Summit, editing the second volume devoted to the sixteenth-century for the multi-volume *The History of British Women's Writing* (2010), contributing to a collection of essays called *Gender and Early Modern Constructions of Childhood*, edited by Naomi J. Miller and Naomi Yavneh, with an essay called "Producing Girls on the English Stage: Performance as Pedagogy in Mary Ward's Convent Schools" (2011), and a monograph, *Midwiving Subjects in Shakespeare's England* (2003). Greeting the first book to carve out a distinct space for girls and girlhood in feminist Shakespeare scholarship, *Shakespeare and the Performance of Girlhood* by Deanne Williams (2014), *Cognition and Girlhood in Shakespeare's World* engages fruitfully with Williams' analysis of distinct models of girlhood, her revelation of expansive evidence for the many stages available for girl actors, and her intervention into paradigms of girlhood hysteria and passivity.

Bicks does not limit her representations of cognitively industrious girls to Shakespeare, but she does privilege his plays, arguing for the complex and sustained

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quality of Shakespeare's attention to how girls think, and reminding us how Shakespeare's cultural authority makes his depictions of girlhood a force to be reckoned with in adaptation. As Bicks puts it, "[we] do seem to prefer our Ophelias unhinged, our Juliets mindlessly enthralled by love, our Mirandas charmingly sheltered and naïve," and states her purpose to recover "the original, cognitively industrious versions of these girls" (27). Chapter One, "A spectacle to men and angels': Juliet Capulet and the Case of Mary Glover," opposes the addled and volatile passions of a love-sick Romeo, and the brawling boys of Verona's streets, with the incisive, inventive, and not always readable, brainwork of a Juliet, both as she is regarded by her parents and nurse, and when alone, to introduce distinctions between male and female adolescent brains as the early moderns depicted them. Juliet's imaginative revivification in the Capulet tomb, when put in conjunction with the conflicting and contested opinions over the evidence of the historical Mary Ward's alleged bewitchment, gets at the heart of this chapter's exploration of how these girls' behavior is often described in spectacular and theatrical ways. Bicks demonstrates how these descriptions belied vested interests in disputed religious and scientific ideas, playing in what Bicks calls "the gray area between pathology and performance" (35). Tracing how the adults in the room sought to understand and control the often apparently unfathomable body-minds of these two girls, one real, one fictional, Bicks argues that "[g]irls' brainwork often challenges oppressive ideologies and serves an ameliorative community function" (64).

The following three chapters each address separate faculties of the brain: the imagination, understanding, and memory, respectively. Chapter Two, "Imagination helps me': Liberating Brainwork in *Comus*, *Othello*, and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*," explores depictions of the imagination as a generative faculty that could produce liberating ideas. Detailed and persuasive close-readings, offered here and throughout the book, demonstrate the potency of the dreams and visions of John Milton's Lady, and William Shakespeare's Desdemona, Emilia, Flavinia, and Jailor's Daughter, all of whose brainwork is shown to operate both in solitude and collaboratively. Bicks's detailed account of Desdemona's "intensive" and "extended" listening, or her daring to imagine having and *being* a man both, for example, makes for buoyant reading; I grieved all the more as Bicks elaborates upon the relentless forced march Desdemona endures into "the cave of care," a harrowing phrase in its implications, and coined by Robert Greene's virgin heroine Mamillia, who describes the loss of freedom brought

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about by marriage: “both the body is given as a slave unto the will of an other man, and the minde is subjecte to sorow and bound in the cave of care” (as cited in Bicks, 19).<sup>1</sup> Even as Bicks argues that the girls featured in this chapter “use their imaginations to go beyond what is present to the senses and to envision possibilities that could liberate themselves and others from dominant and degrading cultural norms” (30), that looming cave of care into which most are bound haunts this chapter and the book.

Chapter Three, “‘The progresse of an Art’: Daughters and the Invention of New Knowledges,” canvasses versions of the popular emblem of Truth, the Daughter of Time, to introduce the early modern epistemological shift from knowledge-making as the discovery of old ideas to innovation as a context for analyses that rethink the following: firstly, an ancient myth about the potter Dibutades’s daughter, seen to invent painting in the early modern revision of the myth; and secondly, what Shakespeare’s daughter-characters Helena and Miranda are taught by their fathers versus what they invent for themselves. Chapter Four, “‘If I should tell / My history’: Memory, Trauma, and Testimony in *Pericles* and *Hamlet*,” attends to recovery, exploring how girls’ brainwork negotiates the urgent and ethical function of remembering and testifying for those individuals and communities who are forgotten or suppressed. Bicks, herself, recovers a daughter’s history suppressed in Shakespeare’s and George Wilkins’s *Pericles* by examining the prose account of the play written by Wilkins, with its detailed account of the rape of the Princess of Antioch by her father. She demonstrates how the play’s other daughters, in relating their own memories, respond to or recall the play’s original violation and rebuke the men who abuse and subsequently forget their victims. Bicks turns to *Hamlet* to show how Ophelia is not only depicted as a storehouse for remembrances but as a judicial chronicler of Denmark’s past, a role that also evokes the communal traumas suffered by the loss of a Catholic past and by Catholics still alive.

In Chapter Five, “‘Put on the minde’: Cognitive Play in *Gallathea*, *The Winter’s Tale*, and *The Convent of Pleasure*,” Bicks shows what happens and what it means when girls choose to “put on” the mind of another, whether that of a boy, a goddess, or a full-grown woman. This chapter argues that the girl characters of John Lyly’s, Shakespeare’s, and Margaret Cavendish’s invention, by putting on minds, “use costume, performance, and cognitive play to embody the positions of sexually active

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Greene, *Mamillia* (London, 1583), D3r–v.

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females – without having to change their bodies into those of ‘women’” (161). The serious work of such cognitive play, as Bicks shows, is to resist, revise, and even reject masculinist scripts and their gender codes as girls experiment with and delight in girl-girl homo-erotics, for example, or in imagining alternative natural life-cycles or extended virginites. This chapter’s focus on the female utopian spaces of fictional imaginations sets up and complements the book’s final chapter, “From thirteene Yeares . . . resolved to serve God’: Mary Ward’s Adolescent Brainwork,” which considers the devotional brainwork of real English Catholic girls training to serve God in a life of perpetual virginity. Bicks’s detailed study of recusant daughter Mary Ward in autobiographical writings, martyrologies, and paintings focuses on Ward’s own assessment of her mind as she responds to her calling. Equally significant is Bicks’s attention to the theatrical pedagogy with which Ward trained the students of her religious houses on the Continent. Ward paid no heed to Catholic rules of enclosure, and both her own and her students’ brainwork propelled them outside into communities on and off theatrical stages, earning them epithets like “galloping girls” and “galloping nuns” (194). Such galloping girls are so wonderfully the *ne plus ultra* for Bicks’s response to modern notions of greensick, lovesick, unhinged, and sickly early modern girls. There is a missed opportunity here, however, to rethink the brainwork of these sick girls too, not just their more robust sisters. Hollowed-cheek Lady Jane Grey, Elizabeth I, as well as the latter Queen’s fictional representation in Thomas Heywood’s *If You Know Not Me, You Know Nobody*, for example, improvise strategic use of their illnesses, real or performed, for instance. Or consider Heywood’s Anne Frankford, a scholar before marriage, who exercises moral deliberation in her attempts to fend off her rapist and who, exiled for adultery, wills herself “Sick, sick, O sick!” to secure the return, the hand, the pardon, and the tears of her husband.<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes I would stop myself as I read to ask why it should matter that the many and significant acts of perception, invention, judgement, understanding, and memory analyzed here—all acts of cognition—repeatedly be emphasized as girls’ *brainwork*? Even the industrious work of brains newly energized by the onset of menarche, a biological event cosmically initiated? Then I would encounter another instance of that cave of marital care and acknowledge how soundly Bicks insistently heralds girls’ *brain* and *brainwork*, the *mind* part of the body-mind. I half-wondered

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Heywood, *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, ed. by Brian Scobie (London: Methuen, 2003), 17.40.

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why there appears to be no evidence for a corresponding biological event that de-charged that vitalized brain, a bodily event available to be harnessed as the justification for a mind to be subsequently “bound in the cave of care” (19). The potent cognitive agency that the early moderns envisioned the newly charged brain affords a girl, however beneficial to individuals and communities in its blush and bloom, must always finally be quenched by any patriarch determined to keep their patriarchy it seems. A girl must finally be reduced to a woman’s body as the early moderns imagined that too: an instrument designed to reproduce and nurture new members. *Cognition and Girlhood in Shakespeare’s World* is a compelling and important book, a useful resource in the classroom and the study, and one which raises new questions about girls and early modern constructions of girlhood. Its thinking about how Shakespeare’s world imagined girls’ brains is relevant to how we think today, and how what it means to think like a girl matters to our own future.

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