CHAPTER 4

The Girl Player, the Virgin Mary, and Romeo and Juliet

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This chapter outlines the dramatic activities of the girl player in early modern England. It surveys the surviving evidence of medieval and early modern girls' performances and situates the girl player within the larger dramatic cultures of early modern England. The history of the girl player in England goes back to the Middle Ages, when girls performed in liturgical drama and mystery plays, as well as in royal entries and processions. In Tudor and Stuart England, girls performed in civic pageants, royal entertainments, and court and household masques. Evidence of girls' performances can be found in eyewitness accounts, stage directions, paintings, account books, and in the plays and masques that were explicitly composed for girls, and that, in some cases, girls themselves composed. Together, this evidence depicts girls performing on almost all early English stages: almost all, in fact, except the commercial, professional stage of Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

Recent feminist scholarship that documents women's participation in the performance cultures of early modern England has refuted long-standing assumptions about women's absence from the stage and revealed women's presence and participation in most aspects of early English drama.[1] The distinctive history of the girl actor, however, has been largely overlooked in scholarship that subsumes girls within the larger category of 'woman' or 'female'. Perhaps because they counted as children, girl players constitute an unusually well-documented and well-represented category of female performer in England, more than their adult counterparts, with a coherent and distinctive repertoire that reaches back to the Middle Ages. Yet scholarly accounts of the child actor have prioritised the celebrated boy actors of the 'Shakespearean stage' over girl actors, highlighting the boys' virtuosity as musical and dramatic performers, as well as their precarious and vulnerable status.[2] This focus on the boy actor is, of course, due to his participation in both commercial theatre companies and professional children's companies. As a result, the long-standing history of the early

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108773775.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

modern girl actor is only just beginning to be recognised as its own particular tradition.[3]

This chapter focuses on one particular aspect of this tradition: girls' performances of virginity and of the Virgin Mary. It charts the history of the girl player performing Mary in medieval and early modern religious drama and pageantry, via the Digby play of *Candlemes Day* and the N-Town *Mary Play,* and it locates a deliberate engagement with this tradition in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Shakespeare's evocation of the tradition of the girl player in *Romeo and Juliet* has been overlooked in scholarship on the play. Recognising the girl player in Shakespeare's characterisation of Juliet allows for a much deeper understanding of the play's engagement with girlhood and its sense of the tragic loss of an established dramatic form associated with the Virgin Mary. The girl player expands our idea of not only who performed but also what it meant to perform in early modern England, incorporating a variety of venues, conditions, contributions, and occasions, beyond the professional stage. Most importantly, she uncovers a category of performer and performance that has previously gone unacknowledged and unexplored, revealing new information and generating new insights about the cultural experiences and contributions of girls in the early modern period.

Acting in early modern England occurred in a wide range of locations, took a variety of different of forms, and was described and understood in multiple ways. There is, first, the combination of mimetic representation and persuasive impersonation that formed the traditional idea of the Renaissance actor, illustrated by surviving early modern discussions of Richard Burbage and Ned Alleyn, who were regularly compared to Proteus and praised for disappearing into their role. But there is also a very different understanding of early modern acting as occupying the space between the performer and the performed or, as Thomas Heywood puts it in *An Apology for Actors* (1612), between the 'personator' and the 'person personated'.[4] As Susan Cerasano explains, an actor 'did not attempt to *become* a character, but to *represent* a character'.[5] Robert Weimann's distinction between 'presentational' and 'representational' acting provides useful terms for distinguishing between these two very different ways of understanding acting, the former acknowledging and making use of the collaborative presence of the audience (such as through the use of soliloquies, or a Chorus, as discussed in Helen Hackett's chapter in this volume) and the latter remaining absorbed in the action, with the audience observing it through what actors today refer to as the fourth wall.[6] Weimann's terms *platea* and *locus* further situate those activities and experiences within

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a specific imaginary place, or *locus*, in which the dramatic action occurs, and a shared space, or *platea*, in which actors communicate with the spectators. Some theatrical spaces, such as Blackfriars, are intimate enough to give the audience the sense that they are eavesdropping on a private space, such as the Duchess of Malfi's bedroom. Other spaces and kinds of drama, such as a royal entertainment on country estate or a civic pageant on London Bridge, demand a different set of transactions between, as well as definitions of, actor and audience. Recent scholarship, including the essays by Natasha Korda and Farah Karim-Cooper in this volume, reveals early modern acting moving restlessly between these categories, with a vocabulary of legible physical gestures and skills that use the body, from hands to feet, to support the expression of character and emotion.[7] This happens even within the same play: a part such as Hamlet requires an actor to disappear into his role, while clown parts are enhanced when they are performed by a known actor with his own signature shtick.

The repertory and dramatic tasks girl actors were typically assigned entailed just one conception of playing. The girl actor is called upon neither to erase her identity completely nor to convey a sense of intense psychological verisimilitude. When she performs, for example, as St Ursula in a Tudor royal entry, or the River Thames or the Daughter of Time in a civic pageant, or a shepherdess, a nymph, or a naiad in a court masque or royal entertainment, the girl actor gestures towards an alternative, and often familiar, identity that does not negate or exclude her own but instead complements it. The girls that performed in court masques and other royal entertainments, such as the teenaged Russell sisters in the *Bisham Entertainment* (1592), Princess Elizabeth Stuart in *Tethys' Festival* (1610), and the schoolgirls of Robert White's *Cupid's Banishment* (1617), or in household performances such as Lady Rachel Fane's *May Masque* (1627) and John Milton's well-known *A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle*, otherwise known as *Comus* (1634), were not paid professionals. They performed their parts much as children perform in school plays for their parents today: not to disappear inside a role, but so their friends and family members could watch them perform. Even when their names were not recorded for posterity, as is the case of the little girls who danced around the young Prince Charles in *Tethys' Festival* and the girl masquers in *Cupid's Banishment*, their identity is not lost or submerged into their parts but instead exists in easy tandem with the part they are playing: John Finnett's remarks about the little girls in *Tethys' Festival* convey the sense that they were very much known quantities to their audiences: 'all daughters of Dukes or Barons' (Figure 1).[8]

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Figure 1 Inigo Jones, *Naiad*.
Bridgeman Art Gallery International

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It may be more appropriate, then, when speaking of the girl performer, not to use the Latinate term 'actor' but instead to adopt the older English term 'player'. As Tom Bishop explains, 'the older term *player* associates theatrical activity with playing, with the recreational or gamesome'.[9] Just as Tiffany Stern's essay in this volume links the playhouse to 'joy and triviality', the girl player evokes a similar combination of the informal and occasional, evocation of the freedom of childhood play, and connection to older medieval as well as provincial dramatic forms that distinguish her from the Protean methods and modes of the 'Renaissance' actor. The sense of dramatic play as a kind of 'earnest game' produces a different relationship between player, character, and audience than the idea that the actor is creating the illusion that he really is the character. The idea of the 'player' is especially suited to girls' performances, which may be understood in contemporary terms as a kind of 'dress-up' game or masquerade, in which they wore costumes to play pre-existing recognised parts in performances that involved a lot of singing and dancing. Their performances contributed to a significant ceremonial or religious event, rather than being the purported focus of the dramatic occasion in and of themselves. However, as John Finnett also observed, the 'little Ladies' of *Tethys' Festival* actually stole the show: 'they performed their dance to the amazement of all the beholders'.

The Virgin Mary lies at the heart of numerous performance opportunities for girls in pre-Reformation England. The Barking Play, a set of four Easter plays devised by Katherine of Sutton, Abbess of Barking Abbey from 1358 to 1376, was performed by the aristocratic women and girls of the abbey as an extension of religious observance. The fourth of these plays, *Visitatio sepulchri*, situates girls at the very source and origin of medieval liturgical drama: the *Quem Quaeritis* (Whom do you seek?) question, asked by the angel to the Three Marys when they visit Christ's Tomb. Their discovery that Christ's body is not in the tomb prompts the Easter revelation: 'He is risen'. In this play, two young novices accompany the adult nuns playing the Three Marys. They carry candles and perform, together, the choral singing of plainchant to describe and comment on the action. Detailed stage directions outline the different emotions they are expected to perform: tearful, plaintive, sighing, joyful, solemn, etc.[10]

The Virgin Mary appeared in civic pageants as well as religious drama, illustrating the blurred lines and common ground between these categories. The pageant of Our Lady in Hereford on 15 May 1486, for the first Provincial Progress of Henry VII, also featured 'many virgins mervealous & Richeley besene on a paiaunt of our lady', including one who delivers a

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speech of welcome in the person of the Virgin herself.[11] The 1503 Mayor's Book of Hereford records pageants for the feast of Corpus Christi that include the 'tres marie', a play about the Resurrection which, at Barking, involved girl performers.[12] For the London Midsummer pageants in 1518–19, payment was made 'to the maidens that were in the pageant of our lady and seynt Elizabeth', and London's 1521 pageant of the Assumption of the Virgin cast a 'very beautiful little girl' as the Virgin.[13] Virgins also appeared in royal entries and coronations: in London, Henry V's royal entry in 1415 called for 'virgins and angels dropping golden coins and laurel leaves'; the coronation entry of Catherine of Valois in 1420 featured 'virgins and angels singing'; and, for Henry VI's royal entry in 1431, 'lily-white maidens' presented 'royal insignia and read written text to Henry VI . . . applauding, dancing, and singing wisely to the king'.[14] This royal entry also included fourteen virgins, three empresses, and an enthroned child. 'Virgins and angels with songs' appeared for the coronation entry of Elizabeth York in 1467, and 'virgins in white' for Henry VIII's coronation entry in 1509. The Accounts of St Martin's Church in Leicester for 1498 describe how 'Before the Mary . . . virgins went in Procession'.[15] Of course, boys sometimes played girl parts as well, but many records clearly identify that girls were performing. For the London Lord Mayors Show in 1523, the Drapers paid 'Item to Gleyns doughter for thassumpcion & Childes eldest daughter for Saynt Ursula & vi virgens w[t] hyr bothe nyghtes after viii[d] apece'.[16] And some records even provide their names: 'Elyn Tuck that plaied the ladye. M. Elizabeth Smyth Agnes Newell & to Margret Cristean the thre ladyes that satt w*ith* her in the said pagentt'.[17] After the Reformation, nostalgic recourse to these traditions recalled pre-Reformation performance practice: on Ascension Day in 1607 in Somerset, girls 'appareled like virgins . . . as hath ben heretofore used to see', some as young as eight years old, were 'carried or led about with others in the streets'.[18]

This snapshot of the numerous available historical examples of girls performing as virgins, and as the Virgin – singing, dancing, delivering speeches, and walking in procession – should dispel any lingering sense that girls did not actually perform in early modern England. And there are many eyewitness accounts of girls performing in England.[19] Previous scholarship has, at best, acknowledged tentatively the existence of the girl actor: Meg Twycross admits, 'it seems to have been permissible for the girls to appear' on the medieval English stage, and John Marshall concedes, 'girls should not be entirely excluded from the pleasures of medieval theatre'.[20] Lynette Muir also draws attention to evidence of girls'

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performance on the continent.[21] Evidence suggests, however, that girls' appearance on early English stages is much more than 'slight', and their participation in a range of dramatic forms and occasions across England constitutes, in fact, its own long-standing and distinctive tradition, rather than the occasional transgression of an otherwise all-male cross-dressed norm.[22]

The Digby play of *Candlemes Day and the Kyllyng of the Children of Israelle* illustrates with especial clarity the close relationship between the early English cult of the Virgin Mary and medieval girls' performance. Recorded in a 1512 miscellany, British Library MS Digby 133, the Digby Candlemas play brings together two biblical events associated with children. The first, Herod's Massacre of the Innocents, was commemorated by the Feast of the Holy Innocents on 28 December, with children's performances of topsy-turvy misrule that cast a young boy or girl as the Boy Bishop, or Girl Abbess. The second, the Presentation of Jesus to the Temple and the Purification of the Virgin, was observed as Candlemas on February 2. Celebrating the purity of the Virgin with the lighting of candles and a candlelit procession, it was the last feast of the Christmas cycle. The children of the Digby Candlemas play constitute a threat to powerful norms: the murdered infants are killed by Herod because he fears one of them will supplant him, while the Candlemas virgins celebrate light, and life, and love in the face of tragedy. Their holy songs and dancing also provide a salvific alternative to the seductive, sinful dance of the young Mary Magdalen in the intensely girl-focused *Digby Play of Mary Magdalene*, which immediately precedes the Candlemas play in the Digby manuscript.

The association of the virgins with Candlemas derives from a *Golden Legend* account of a 'good lady' who had a dream vision of a mass attended by the Virgin, in which virgins arrived bearing candles, and which Voragine connects to ancient Roman candlelit processions in honour of the lost daughter of Ceres, Proserpina.[23] Poeta, the narrator/master of ceremonies, calls attention to the Virgin Mary's status as daughter, 'this glorious maiden doughter vnto Anna' (l. 9), and invites the virgins to dance: 'and ye, virgynes, shewe summe sport and plesure, / These people to solas, and to do god reverence' (ll. 54–5), with the stage direction, *et tripident*.[24] When the play moves to the Temple, Symeon bids the girls to sing his canticle, 'Nunc dimittis' (l. 454; 'Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace'), otherwise known as the Song of Simeon: '*Here shal Symeon bere Jhesu in his armys, goyng a procession rounde aboute the tempille, and al this wyle the virgynis synge "Nunc dimittis"*'. Anna

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Prophetissa directs the girls to worship the Christ Child with candles, and the well-known stage direction opens the performance up to as many girls as possible: '*Her virgynes, as many as a man wylle, shalle holde tapers in ther hands*'. As the girls praise Symeon's witnessing of the baby Jesus in the Temple, 'Quia viderunt oculi mei salutare tuum' ('For mine eyes have seen thy salvation'), their song and procession externalise the gladness in Symeon's 'inward mende' (l. 502) that he has perceived the Christ Child with his 'bodely eye' (l. 503).

Like the girls in the Barking Abbey *Visitatio*, the Digby girls enhance the play's religious experience by dancing, singing, and carrying candles. Contradicting the traditional perception that early modern women were silent on the stage, one of the virgins speaks:

> *And the first seyth*: PRIMA VIRGO: As ye comaunde we shal do our devere,
> That Lord to plese, echon for oure partye.
> He makyth vn[to] us so comfortable chere,
> That we must nedes this babe magnifie!
>
> (434–7)

'Magnifie' here echoes the opening of the Virgin's Magnificat, the Canticle of Mary, on the occasion of her visit to St Elizabeth: 'Magnificat anima mea Dominum' ('My soul doth Magnify the Lord'). As Theresa Coletti points out, the play's dedication to St Anne underwrites its thematics of maternity, from the tragic, resistant mothers of the Herod play to the celebration of fertility in the Candlemas play.[25] As the teacher of the young Virgin Mary, St Anne is also associated with pedagogy: as the girls are directed, commanded, and ordered throughout the play, they are directed how best to please God and worship Jesus, and their final stage direction confirms the priority of dance: *et tripident*.

The virgins' singing and dancing are, as Marshall argues, 'not mere diversionary afterthoughts' but instead have 'a real contribution to make to the feeling and understanding of the plays'.[26] The Digby *Candlemes Day* reveals girls as fully part of what Eamon Duffy calls the 'para-liturgical and dramatic elaborations' of the Candlemas celebrations that created 'an even deeper or more immediate sense of imaginative participation in the biblical event . . . than that offered by the prescribed liturgy'.[27] Some visual clues are available that suggest how this may have looked. Although the portrait of Sir Henry Unton, painted circa 1595, depicts his wedding masque and not a religious play, its representation of girl performers walking in procession before Diana, a goddess of chastity, allows us to imagine how the Candlemas performance might have looked, complete with candles and music (Figure 2). The many girls and little children holding candles in

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Figure 2 Sir Henry Unton, Portrait.
National Portrait Gallery

Stefan Lochner's 1447 *The Presentation of Christ in the Temple*, painted in Germany, illustrate the presence of similar Candlemas rituals outside of England (Figure 3).

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Figure 3 Stefan Lochner's 1447 *The Presentation of Christ in the Temple*. Wikimedia Commons

A contemporary production of the Digby *Candlemes Day and the Kyllyng of the Children of Israelle*, re-named 'Herod's Killing of the Children' and 'The Presentation in the Temple' by the Medieval Convent Drama project (medievalconventdrama.org), showcases the priority given the girl player in the medieval text by placing them at the front and centre of the action.[28] Performed in New College Chapel, Oxford, in February 2017, the production features an Oxford girls' choir, Frideswide Voices, dedicated to promoting girls singing liturgical music in Oxford

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college chapels. Girl performers set the tone of this production from the very beginning by displaying plaster statues of Mary, Joseph, and Magi during Poeta's dedication of the play to St Anne, and then dancing, holding hands in a circle, around the statues. After the children are killed by Herod, girl singers perform the melancholy Coventry Carol, with its refrain 'bye bye lully lullay'. As they sing, the sound of an infant crying wrenchingly contrasts the comic buffoonery of Watkin and the soldiers against the horror of the murders; the song movingly stops the action to allow the audience to meditate on the unspeakable emotional impact of this familiar biblical story.[29] The striking, shocking sight of the children's dolls, representing the infants, impaled on spikes, also suggests how Shakespeare may have been haunted by just this kind of dramatic moment: in a sobering reflection on the horrors of war in *Henry V*, Shakespeare references Herod's 'bloody-hunting slaughtermen' (3.3.41).

Girls also perform the parts of the mothers in this production: evoking the youthfulness of the Virgin Mary, comically scorning the soldiers, movingly lamenting the murder of their children, and angrily cursing their murderers. This production allows the girl players to display a range of emotions, like feisty virgin martyrs in the plays of Hrotswitha of Gandersheim. Its costumes also take the girl players beyond the demurely virginal white by dressing them in sacerdotal robes of gold, orange, purple, and green. These priestly garments thus reinforce the girls' active role in the blessing, as their songs and candles bear witness to death and tragedy as well as to light and redemption. Moving beyond the limits of the stage direction, *Her virgynes, as many as a man wylle, shalle holde tapers in ther hands,* this production effectively mobilises its girl players to dramatise the cultural range and power of the Virgin Mary.

The richly documented medieval and early modern tradition of girls' performance as virgins and as the Virgin Mary reflects the intensely Marian devotional culture of pre-Reformation England. The Feast of the Presentation of the Virgin, or the *Oblatio Sancte Marie Virginis*, which celebrates the presentation of the Virgin, as a toddler, to the Elders of the Temple of Jerusalem by her parents, Joachim and Anna, was probably observed in England as early as the Anglo Saxons. Medieval audiences were hungry for the back-history of the Virgin, who gets disproportionately scant mention in the Bible given the enormous religious tradition that surrounds her, and so they turned to the stories of the girlhood of the Virgin Mary found in two apocryphal gospels: the *Protevangelium of James*, written around 145 AD, and the *Gospel of the Pseudo-Matthew*, which dates to circa 800 AD.[30] These were the main sources for the account of

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the Virgin's girlhood in the highly popular *Legenda Aurea*, or *Golden Legend*, which inspired depictions of the girlhood of the Virgin and especially her Presentation in the Temple in visual art as well as drama. According to the apocrypha, Joachim and Anna are a long-married couple, unable to conceive a child, who vow that they will dedicate any child they have to God. They miraculously conceive Mary, and offer her to the Temple in Jerusalem when she is three. Trotting up the steps to the Temple, she immediately demonstrates stunning intelligence and learning. At the age of fourteen (traditionally associated with the advent of menses), she is betrothed to Joseph – at which point the story joins the familiar narrative of the Nativity.

The English *N-Town Play*, which dates from about 1468, dramatises these episodes in a small play-cycle devoted to the Virgin that is incorporated within the larger compilation. More than any other mystery play, as Coletti observes, the *N-Town Play* makes the 'effort to write a dramatic version of salvation history that gives equal time to its major feminine interventions', reflecting its origins in the extremely Marian-centred devotional culture of East Anglia.[31] Mary's first lines in the *N-Town Play* are quite brief and appropriate to the young age of the character: she delivers a charming little quatrain of apology for ever making her parents 'wrothe' (330).[32] However, as her part progresses, it demands ever-longer speeches that draw on the religious writings of medieval philosophers and commentators such as Richard Rolle and Nicholas Love. The play lays heavy emphasis on Mary's 'tender age and young', highlighting the contrast between her age and the sophistication of her speeches: after one of them, her father Joachim remarks, 'ȝe answere and ȝe were twenty ȝere olde!'

The numerous examples of girls playing the Virgin outlined above make it easy to imagine a young girl playing the part of the Virgin in the *N-Town Mary Play*. However, it does strain credulity to imagine the performer of Mary in the *N-Town Play* as a three-year-old.[33] We are, of course, familiar with stories of young prodigies that memorise the works of Shakespeare or the periodic table or make their orchestral debuts. Certainly, medieval culture relied much more heavily on memory than we do today. Moreover, while it is possible to take the *N-Town Play* at its word, we can also imagine a slightly older child playing the part. This is corroborated by the stage direction, which describes her as '*al in whyte as a childe of thre ȝere age*' (270). As J. A. Tasioulas observes, the iconography depicting the Presentation of the Virgin occasionally deviates from the apocryphal sources by representing a much older child.[34] Since the *N-Town Play* follows carefully the chronology set out in the apocryphal accounts of

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the Girlhood of the Virgin Mary, treating the 'holy matere' (266) of Mary's girlhood from age three 'tyl fortene ȝere' (268), the year of her wedding to Joseph, it is possible that the teenager who plays Mary in the later part of the play could move between the parts, using her acting skills to embody her younger self, while also representing the older Virgin in the Annunciation and Nativity.[35] Certainly, medieval drama does not place heavy emphasis on visual realism. And although we know by the detailed stage directions that the version of the play that has come down to us in the manuscript was designed for the stage, it was, ultimately, preserved and even embellished as a text designed more for devotional or even academic reading than for active performance. In this respect, what is recorded in the manuscript text is an idealised version of the play that was produced: one that accords as much with the exalted events of biblical history as it does with the lived, practical details of the play that a little girl performed for her community.

A surviving French counterpart of the *N-Town Play* provides an important example of girls' performance outside England. Composed by the fourteenth-century French diplomat Philippe de Mézières, the office celebrating the *Presentation of the Virgin Mary to the Temple*, first performed at Avignon in 1372, calls for a 'young and most beautiful girl, about three or four years old', to play the Virgin.[36] Two other little girls served as her attendants, dressed in white to signify their innocence, and an expanded version of the play required fifteen little girls. Described as a 'landmark in theatre history' and as 'no mere dramatic office, but rather . . . a true play', the *Presentation* includes unusually copious and detailed stage directions that involve Mary being led up the fifteen steps of the temple, with a dove and a candle, where she is lauded with the singing of the fifteen Psalms of the Gradual.[37] Otherwise known as the Psalms of the Ascent (Psalms 120–34), they were learned from memory as an essential part of religious instruction. Mary is often depicted learning them from her mother, Anna. The fifteen Psalms symbolise the fifteen steps of the Temple of Jerusalem, which Mary climbed when she was presented to the Temple Elders, and which often figure in artistic representations of Mary's Presentation to the Temple. As Susan Udry argues, girlhood in the play serves as a symbol for holiness, exalting children and girls, especially as models of spiritual dedication and devotion (Figure 4).[38] The stage directions of de Mézières's play shed light on how the *N-Town Play* might have managed with a very young child. Both plays hinge on the performance of Psalms, and the communal singing of them would have eased the burden placed on its young girl player. As we saw in the Medieval Convent Drama

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Figure 4 Titian, *The Presentation of Mary to the Temple*.
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production of the *Killing of the Children*, the girls confidently sing together, led by their concert master. Surrounded by angels and other little girls, doing obeisance, Mary would have conveyed the idea of the community supporting each other in its ritual of devotion.[39]

The rich late medieval tradition of the girl player continued after the Reformation. As girls performed in Tudor entertainments, pageants, and masks, pre-Reformation virgins and angels were replaced by post-Reformation nymphs and naiads.[40] Shakespeare drew upon his own lived experience of girl actors within this long-standing dramatic tradition, and the girl player shaped his representations of girl characters and notions of girlhood. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare's Nurse offers a sharp recollection of Juliet at three years old, at the age of weaning, and the play goes on to present this little girl, 'not fourteen', (1.3.15) on the brink of marriage.[41] Performed by a boy on the public stage, Shakespeare's Juliet constitutes a recollection of a tradition of Marian performance that had been, by this time, suppressed by the Reformation. This tradition did not just disappear overnight, to be utterly forgotten, but was instead repurposed by Shakespeare to underpin and inspire a narrative of love and romance on his secular stage.[42]

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As Juliet's nurse says, of Juliet: 'She's not fourteen' (1.3.15). And Capulet says, 'She hath not seen the change of fourteen years' (1.2.9). Juliet's age is mentioned as 'not fourteen' a total of six times in the play. Her weaning is also the subject of extended discussion: the Nurse recalls, to Lady Capulet, when she was weaning the three-year-old Juliet as well as her daughter, Susan, who is now 'with God' (1.3.21). In the apocryphal narratives of Mary's Presentation in the Temple, weaning signifies the moment of her separation from her mother, when she is old enough to be offered up to the Elders for religious instruction (horrific though this seems to present-day parents). In *Romeo and Juliet*, this weaning is a rite of passage that anticipates Juliet's eventual womanhood, as the Nurse's husband makes an inappropriate joke about her future sexual self: 'Thou wilt fall backward when thou hast more wit' (1.3.44).

The Virgin Mary maintains an insistent presence throughout the play through a set of allusions and evocations that persistently and suggestively evoke this supressed figure in the context of its fourteen-year-old heroine.[43] The Nurse swears by the Virgin Mary, 'my holidam' (1.3.45), that Juliet cried when she fell down and broke her brow. Repeated references to maidenheads – from Samson and Gregory's opening sexualised wordplay about 'maidenheads' (1.1.23), to the Nurse's oath by her 'maidenhead at twelve year old' (1.3.2), to Juliet's fears, 'And death, not Romeo, take my maidenhead' (3.2.137) – refer to not only the anatomical condition of virginity but also the image of the maidenhead, a common seal or device which was always understood as a reference to the Virgin. The symbol of the London Mercer's Company was a maidenhead, and they used a maiden as a 'living emblem' in their processions.[44] Juliet is also referred to, frequently, as the 'Lady', which is also a term for the Virgin and invokes the Virgin Mary in various ways. Romeo's dream about Juliet as his 'lady' recalls the Virgin's status as life-giving intercessor:

> I dreamt my lady came and found me dead –
> Strange dream that gives a dead man leave to think –
> And breathed such life with kisses in my lips
> That I revived and was an emperor.
>
> (5.1.6–9).

In the First Quarto, the Nurse's 'What, lady! Love! What, bride! What, Juliet!' (17.56) toggles through the Virgin's appellations as Lady as well as Bride of Christ.[45]

Juliet's association with the Virgin Mary specifically recalls the story of her Presentation in the Temple. Just as the Nurse's account of Juliet's

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weaning emphasises her age of three, her recollection of Juliet falling down and breaking her brow evokes the image of the Virgin Mary as a toddler, perched precariously at the top of the fifteen steps of the temple. The Nurse provides a vivid recollection of the young toddler, standing on her own two feet: 'For then she could stand high-lone – nay, by th' rood, / She could have run and waddled all about' (1.3.38–9). In this case, the young Juliet falls and breaks her brow, anticipating both her sexual 'fall' and her tragic one, but *Romeo and Juliet* also provides instances of Juliet dancing, just as the young Mary in the *Protevangelium*, having climbed the steps of the Temple, 'danced with her feet, and all the house of Israel loved her'. There is, for example, the Capulet Ball ('foot it, girls!' 1.4.138), where Romeo first witnesses her in motion: 'Oh, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!' (155), and then retires just to watch her: 'The measure done, I'll watch her place of stand' (161). When Friar Laurence watches Juliet rushing towards Romeo on her wedding night, he also describes her as a dancer:

> Here comes the lady. Oh, so light a foot
> Will ne'er wear out the everlasting flint;
> A lover may bestride the gossamers
> That idles in the wanton summer air
> And yet not fall, so light is vanity.
> (2.5.16–20)

Here, Shakespeare is expressing how love makes you feel like you are walking on air. He also draws on his own lived experience of girls dancing out of religious devotion, thus fitting Juliet, as a kind of modern Virgin Mary, into a set of existing theatrical traditions associated with the performance of girlhood. From its post-Reformation vantage point, the play fashions Juliet as the goddess of a very different kind of religion of love.

Shakespeare works repeatedly with the idea of Juliet ascending. The iconic visual impact of the balcony scene, as she looks down on Romeo, is reinforced by Romeo's language which consistently elevates her: 'Juliet is the sun' (2.1.45); 'her eye in heaven' (2.1.62). Before he is given leave to 'Ascend her chamber' (3.3.147), he is constantly looking up to see her, imagining her eyes twinkling like 'two of the fairest stars in all the heaven' (2.1.58); describing her as a bird, 'mine eyas?' (2.1.209), or as a 'bright angel':[46]

> Oh, speak again, bright angel, for thou art
> As glorious to this night, being o'er my head,
> As is a wingèd messenger of heaven
> Unto the white upturnèd wond'ring eyes

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Of mortals that fall back to gaze on him
When he bestrides the lazy puffing clouds
And sails upon the bosom of the air.
(2.1.68–74)

This moment conjures visual representations of the Assumption of the Virgin, in which Mary's physical body was transported to heaven at the end of her life. As we have seen, the Assumption of the Virgin was an opportunity for girls' performance on early English stages: these performances were recalled on Ascension Day in 1607, with girls 'appareled like virgins . . . as hath ben heretofore used to see'.[47] The various discussions about Juliet's status as not-quite-dead after she takes the potion also allude to the doctrinal aspects of the Assumption of the Virgin. Juliet reflects, 'How, if when I am laid into the tomb, / I wake before the time that Romeo / Come to redeem me?' (4.3.30–2), recalling how the Virgin was laid in the tomb and then spirited away to Heaven. And Friar Laurence's words, 'Heaven and yourself / Had part in this fair maid; now heaven hath all' (4.4.93–4) and 'and weep ye now, seeing she is advanced / Above the clouds, as high as heaven itself?' (100–1) also suggest that, like the Virgin, Juliet has advanced into heaven without even leaving her body behind.[48] This sense of Juliet as always already in the air, not even touching the ground, comes out in Friar Laurence's words in the First Quarto, when Juliet enters '*somewhat fast*':

See where she comes!
So light of foot ne'er hurts the trodden flower.
Of love and joy see, see, the sovereign power.
(9.10–12)

Juliet is, here, a girl performer who is well known to her audience, performing both her own identity as girl, and as virgin, as well as tapping into a centuries-long tradition of devotional and dramatic practice associated with the Virgin Mary.

The most widely available textual account of the Girlhood of the Virgin Mary was the *Golden Legend*, one of the first books that William Caxton printed in English.[49] As I have suggested here, Shakespeare likely understood the story as one that was also performed, and performed by a girl. While it may seem counter-intuitive that Shakespeare should draw upon a paragon of chastity in his depiction of a girl character who rushes headlong and happily into sex at the age of thirteen, by drawing upon Marian lore and his own experience of girls' performances of virginity, Shakespeare infuses Juliet and her choices with an iconic, religious quality, exalting her

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girlhood and making her trajectory one that is as sacred as it is tragic. He transfers Mary's status as a model for religious devotion, and her dedication to God and holiness, onto Juliet.[50] Subsequent engagements with *Romeo and Juliet* that pick up aspects of this tradition, from the Prokofiev ballet adaptation to *West Side Story* (with its heroine, Maria), to Baz Lurhmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo+Juliet*, which draws heavily on images of the Madonna, constitute latter-day confirmations of the abiding influence of a tradition that exists across, or despite, the Reformation, and that enacts English culture's persistent saturation with and fixation on the Virgin Mary: the tradition of the girl player.

Notes

1 The bibliography on women and the early modern stage is very long. Key works relevant to the English stage include Clare McManus, *Women on the Renaissance Stage: Anna of Denmark and Female Masquing in the Stuart Court 1590–1619* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002); *Women Players in England 1500–1600: Beyond the All-Male Stage*, ed. Pamela Allen Brown and Peter Parolin (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005); and Sophie Tomlinson, *Women on Stage in Stuart Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). See also, more recently, *Renaissance Women's Performance and the Dramatic Canon: Theatre History, Evidence, and Narratives*, ed. Clare McManus and Lucy Munro, *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 33 (2015).

2 On the boy actor and the children's companies, see Lucy Munro, *Children of the Queen's Revels: A Jacobean Theatre Repertory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), and Edel Lamb, *Performing Childhood in the Early Modern Theatre: The Children's Playing Companies, 1599–1613* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

3 See my *Shakespeare and the Performance of Girlhood* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); 'Shakespeare and the Girl Masquer', *Shakespeare Studies*, 44 (2016), 203–29; and 'Chastity, Speech, and the Girl Masquer', *Childhood, Education, and the Stage in Early Modern England*, ed. Deanne Williams and Richard Preiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 162–83.

4 Thomas Heywood, *An Apology for Actors* (London, 1612).

5 S. P. Cerasano, 'The Chamberlain's – Kings Men', in *A Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. David Scott Kastan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 328–45 (342).

6 Robert Weimann, *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice: Playing and Writing in Shakespeare's Theatre*, ed. Helen Higbee and William West (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

7 Farah Karim-Cooper, *The Hand on the Shakespearean Stage: Gesture, Touch, and the Spectacle of Dismemberment* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), and Evelyn Tribble, *Early Modern Actors and Shakespeare's Theatre: Thinking with the Body* (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2017). On the expressive

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value of feet in Shakespeare, see also Tom Bishop, 'Boot and Shtick', *Shakespeare Studies*, 43 (2015), 35–49.

8 Quoted in Sir Ralph Winwood, *Memorials of the Affairs of State in the Reigns of Queen Elizabeth and King James I*, vol. 3 (London, 1725), 180.

9 Tom Bishop, 'Shakespeare's Theatre Games', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 40 (2010), 65–88 (66). See also his 'The Art of Playing', in *Medieval Shakespeare: Pasts and Presents*, ed. Ruth Morse, Helen Cooper, and Peter Holland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 159–76.

10 See Anne Yardley and Jesse T. Mann, 'The Liturgical Dramas for Holy Week at Barking Abbey', *Medieval Feminist Forum*, 3 (2014), 1–39.

11 *Records of Early English Drama: Herefordshire and Worcestershire*, vol. 1. Herefordshire, ed. David N. Klausner (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 115.

12 *Records of Early English Drama: Herefordshire and Worcestershire*, vol. 1, 115–16.

13 *A Calendar of Dramatic Records in the Books of the Livery Companies of London, 1485–1640*, Malone Society Collections, vol. 3, ed. Jean Robertson. (Oxford: Malone Society, 1954), 4; *A Calendar of Dramatic Records in the Books of the London Clothworkers' Company.* Addenda to Collections, vol. 3 (Oxford: Malone Society, 1959), 3.

14 *Records of Early English Drama: Civic London to 1558*, vol. 2, ed. Anne Lancashire (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 877, 878, 883, 890, 894.

15 *The Accounts of the Churchwardens of S. Martin's, Leicester, 1489–1844*, ed. Thomas North (Leicester: Samuel Clarke, 1884), 3.

16 *A Calendar of Dramatic Records, 1485–1640*, 14, and *Records of Early English Drama: Civic London to 1558*, vol. 3, 365, 414.

17 *Records of Early English Drama: Civic London to 1558*, vol. 3, 521. For discussion, see Meg Twycross, 'Transvestism in the Mystery Plays', *Medieval English Theatre*, 5 (1983), 123–80 (130), and Richard Rastall, 'Female Roles in All-Male Casts', *Medieval English Theatre*, 7 (1985), 25–51.

18 *Records of Early English Drama: Somerset*, vol. 2, ed. James Stokes and Robert J. Alexander (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 495.

19 See, for example, John Finnett's account of the 'little Ladies' in *Tethys Festival*, cited above, note 10, and John Lydgate, 'Henry VI's Triumphal Entry into London', in *Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, vol. 2, *Secular Poems*, ed. H. N. MacCracken (London: Early English Text Society, 1934), 636–7.

20 Twycross, 'Transvestism in the Mystery Plays', 132; John Marshall, '"Her Virgynes, As Many As a Man Wylle": Dance and Provenance in Three Late Medieval Plays: *Wisdom, The Killing of the Children, The Conversion of St Paul*', *Leeds Studies in English*, 25 (1994), 111–48 (131).

21 Lynette Muir, 'Women on the Medieval Stage: The Evidence from France', *Medieval English Theatre*, 7 (1985), 107–19.

22 Gary Waller describes the evidence for women taking part in medieval English drama as 'little – admittedly slight'. *The Virgin Mary in Late Medieval and*

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Early Modern English Literature and Popular Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 72. Gail McMurray Gibson affirms the 'English medieval custom of all-male performers' playing female parts in *Theatre of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 99.

23 Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 143–50.

24 *Candlemes Day and the Kyllyng of the Children of Israelle* in *The Late Medieval Religious Plays of Bodleian MSS Digby 133 and E Museo 160*, ed. Donald C. Baker, John L. Murphy, and Louis B. Hall, Jr. (Oxford: Early English Text Society, 1982), 96–116.

25 Theresa Coletti, 'Genealogy, Sexuality, and Sacred Power: The Saint Anne Dedication of the Digby *Candlemas Day and the Killing of the Children of Israel*', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 29 (1999), 25–60.

26 John Marshall, 'Modern Productions of Medieval English Plays', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 290–311 (308).

27 Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 20–1.

28 Although Medieval Convent Drama overstates the case by claiming, on the YouTube site, that it is 'the only extant medieval English play to feature female performers'. See: www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-uEWUBP6DI.

29 The Coventry Carol appears in another Nativity play, the Coventry *Pageant of the Shearmen and the Tailors*.

30 *The Protevangelium of James* and *The Gospel of the Pseudo-Matthew*, in *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations*, ed. Bart D. Ehrman and Zlatko Pleše (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 31–71, 73–113.

31 Theresa Coletti, *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints: Theatre, Gender, and Religion in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 229.

32 *The Mary Play from the N-Town Manuscript*, ed. Peter Meredith (London: Longman, 1987), 42.

33 Peter Meredith concedes 'the main actor in the Mary play . . . may well have been female'. 'Performance, Verse and Occasion in the *N-Town Mary Play*', in *Individuality and Achievement in Middle English Poetry*, ed. O. S. Pickering (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), 205–21.

34 Jane Tasioulas, 'Between Doctrine and Domesticity: The Portrayal of Mary in the N-Town Plays', in *Medieval Women in Their Communities*, ed. Diane Watt (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 222–45.

35 When it is time for her to marry, the Bishop makes it very clear that 'the law of God biddeth . . . That at fourteen years of age / Every damsel, whoso she be, / To the increase of more plenty, / Should be brought in good degree / Unto her spousage'.

36 The complete manuscript, including the dramatic presentation, is in Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale MS Latin 17330. See *Philippe de Mézières's Campaign*

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for the Feast of Mary's Presentation, ed. William Coleman (Toronto: University of Toronto Press/Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1981).

37 *Philippe de Mézières and his Age: Piety and Politics in the Fourteenth Century*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Kiril Petkov (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 5, and Karl Young, 'Phillippe de Mézières' Dramatic Office for the Presentation of the Virgin', *PMLA*, 26.1 (1911), 181–234 (234).

38 Susan Udry, '"Putting on the Girls:" Mary's Girlhood and the Performance of Monarchial Authority in Philippe de Mézières's Dramatic Office for the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple', *European Medieval Drama*, 8 (2004), 1–18.

39 The English manuscript highlights the Psalms by copying them in the formal *textura* script used for Bibles. This script sets off the holy Psalms against the secretary hand used for the vernacular dialogue.

40 I write about this transition in my 'Shakespeare and the Girl Masquer' and 'Chastity, Speech, and the Girl Masquer'.

41 *Romeo and Juliet*, The Norton Shakespeare, 3rd ed., ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2016). All references to this play will be to this edition.

42 For a rich discussion of Shakespeare's imaginative adaptation and transformation of Catholic material see Gillian Woods, *Shakespeare's Unreformed Fictions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

43 On Shakespeare's evocation of Catholic culture in *Romeo and Juliet*, see Beatrice Groves, who argues for the traces of Easter, or what she calls the 'paschal motif', in *Romeo and Juliet*, in *Texts and Traditions: Religion in Shakespeare, 1592–1604* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2007), 60–88. See also François Laroque, '"Rare Italian Master(s)": Roman Art in *Romeo and Juliet*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *The Winter's Tale*', in *Shakespeare, Italy, and Intertextuality*, ed. Michele Marrapodi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 227–38.

44 *Records of Early English Drama: Civic London to 1558*, vol. 3, 1342.

45 *The First Quarto of Romeo and Juliet*, ed. Lukas Erne. The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

46 'Heaven' and 'heavens' appear thirty-three times in the play.

47 At Chester, the 'wurshipfful Wyffys of this towne' staged and possibly performed, as well, the play of the Assumption of the Virgin: a play which was most likely incorporated within the larger Chester cycle, but was later dropped, probably due to Reformist objections to the Virgin Mary.

48 According to one apocryphal tale, she drops down her girdle from heaven, to St Thomas the Apostle.

49 First printed in 1483, some eighty copies of the Caxton *Golden Legend* survive, an astonishing number for such an early printed book. See Morgan Ring, 'Annotating the *Golden Legend* in Early Modern England', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 72 (2019), 816–62.

50 Olivia Hussey, who plays Juliet in the 1968 Zeffirelli film of *Romeo and Juliet*, went on to play the Virgin Mary in Zeffirelli's 1977 *Jesus of Nazareth*.

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