

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Higginbotham, Jennifer, and Mark Albert Johnston, eds. *Queering Childhood in Early Modern English Drama and Culture*

Rosalind Kerr

Tensions à l'âge de l'imprimé : conflit et concurrence des publics
dans la littérature française de la Renaissance
Tensions in the Age of Printing: Audience Conflict and Competition in
French Literature of the Renaissance
Volume 42, numéro 1, winter 2019

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1064546ar>
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1064546ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)
2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Kerr, R. (2019). Compte rendu de [Higginbotham, Jennifer, and Mark Albert Johnston, eds. *Queering Childhood in Early Modern English Drama and Culture*]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 42(1), 390–392.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1064546ar>

ideas through the filter of their subsequent readers proves to be both instructive and beneficial.

JOHNNY L. BERTOLIO

University of Toronto

Higginbotham, Jennifer, and Mark Albert Johnston, eds.

Queering Childhood in Early Modern English Drama and Culture.

London: Palgrave, 2018. Pp. x, 281 + 3 ill. ISBN 978-3-319-72768-4 (hardcover) \$109.

In a very informative introduction, the editors set out their purposefully anachronistic intentions to look at ways queer children represented in Renaissance drama and culture subvert the expected heteronormative happy endings of comedy and romance. They look for ways in which these characters may have appeared queer then and might today, allowing for a fluid backward and forward reading of history. Also, the lateral sideways movement which Stockton has detailed as the growth pattern of the queer child yields exciting new readings (7). The editors defend the range and variety of the ten chapters in “queering queerness” (6) through teasing out myriad cultural and gender anomalies. They avoid any reductive synthesizing of the chapters, observing instead that queerness had not yet acquired erotic connotations and that homonormativity prevailed in male-male friendships; furthermore, erotic relations between powerful men and women with children were not necessarily seen as abusive. Higginbotham and Johnston insist that boys, at least, were assumed to have erotic agency and that early modern pedophilia cannot be equated with modern queer homoeroticism defined as mutually consensual adult sex. Ultimately, boys, performing as pederastic subordinates, were used to validate contemporary patriarchal power systems. Next, they suggest that the two overlapping early modern sexual models encourage “a radical unknowing” (17) in relation to conceptions of sex, gender, and sexuality. Galenic influences of the “one-sex model” (17), where females might potentially become men, favoured notions of “gender fluidity, mutability and change” (19) facilitating reading the child as queer. Humoral discourses also helped to explain categories such as tomboy, roaring girl, asexual, and gender queer. The chapters

that follow explore these and other theories as the authors puzzle over specific representations but generally avoid any prescriptive conclusions.

My brief summary of each chapter gives a sample of these sideways methodologies, beginning with chapter 2, where Simone Chess speculates on an asexuality spectrum by following three asexual adolescents: Shakespeare's Adonis, Slender in *The Merry Wives*, and Peregrine in *The Antipodes*, as they pass into adulthood while remaining uninterested in sexual intercourse.

Urvashi Chakravarty's chapter 3 uses Caliban's threat to have peopled the island with non-white offspring by raping Miranda to introduce examples where a queer counternarrative unsettles white reproductive futurity. For example, in *The Merchant of Venice*, the ever-present threat of miscarried mercantilism is expressed by Portia's unfair casket test ensuring her foreign suitors' failure and childlessness. Finally, arguing "that the queerest child is the one who is altogether absent" (70), the last example treats the missing changeling child in *Dream* as a signal to audiences to confront their racist expectations of natal futurity.

Melissa Welshans explores Moll Cutpurse's "roaring girl" in chapter 4 to show how she "grows sideways" (80) because she cannot fit into the heteronormative template and hence works as a queer decoy ensuring the marriage of Mary and Sebastian. In her final act of sideways growth, she breaks the fourth wall to proclaim her queer return, referencing Mary Frith, the real roaring girl.

In chapter 5, Higginbotham explores several representations of tomboy queers to argue that they expose the construction of boyish masculinity. Tomboys are threatening because they blur male-female sex-gender divisions and translate homoerotic and pederastic into a queer heterosexuality. However, tomboys, contrary to Halberstam's contemporary categories, do not model female same-sex desire.

Johnston's chapter 6 reads the queer apprenticeship to violence and butchery that is practised in *Titus Andronicus* as the parents imprint their barbarity on their offspring who "fall backward" (117) into sideways growth, arresting any productive development. Still, he notes that when Lucius surprisingly saves Aaron's black child, he "queers through rejection" (138) their lessons in dynastic vengeance.

M. Tyler Sasser's focus in chapter 7 is the queer schoolboy Moth in *Love's Labor's Lost*. As Moth satirizes and resists various forms of ideal pedagogical

masculinities, he ultimately disrupts and queers the play's gender ideals. As such, he exposes Navarre's proclaimed superiority as a rhetorical construction.

In chapter 8, Bethany Packard examines the precocious child Giovanni's sideways growth in Webster's *White Devil* as he refuses to model himself on his murderous father and uncle. Queer in his constant sidestepping of his expected role as heir, he destabilizes expectations about patrilineal inheritance, defying idealistic notions of carrying on the parent's legacy.

Rachel Prusko looks at Marlowe's "agequeer" (196) boy king in *Edward II*, noting that the youthful and tearful future Edward III shines a light on the homosexual relationship of his father and Gaveston since he refuses to go along with the machinations of his mother and Mortimer. In assuming the throne, Edward III will cast off the entrapment his weaker father fell into.

In chapter 10, Lucy Munro focuses on the striking sex-gender effects that boy actors from different children's companies had in performing three plays involving sexual transformation: In *Amyntas*, a mature man, Jocastus, delights when told he will transform into a woman; in *The Maid's Metamorphosis*, the maid begs Apollo to turn her into a man to escape a rape; and in *May Day*, a young woman tells the audience she is a man, which saves her later from a stage rape. In their very flexible, glitchy switches back and forth, these boy actors are ultimately queer in showing the arbitrary relationship between gender and the body.

Chapter 11 discusses Sam Mendes's 1992 staging of *Richard III* where the two adult female actors playing Elizabeth and Anne double as the ill-fated boys. Gemma Miller's stage reading highlights how this demystifying effect queered the idealized tropes of childhood innocence and futurity.

I conclude with Kate Chedgoy's "Afterword" which praises the collection and suggests that it be followed by research that treats the child as the subject. While many of the articles advocate for a creative listening of these submerged voices, more work is needed to reflect on the restraints on children's agency. A fruitful line of inquiry could be a feminist emphasis on finding minority voices, looking at identities across rather than along vectors of gender and sex.

ROSALIND KERR

University of Alberta