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Shakespeare, She Wrote

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Balizet, Ariane M. *Shakespeare and Girls' Studies.* London: Routledge, 2020. 190 pages. ISBN 9781032083056. Pbk. £36.99.

Girlhood has been an object of increasing interest in recent years, yet scholars may struggle to locate books that genuinely reckon with the representations of girls in culture. Ariane M. Balizet's *Shakespeare and Girls' Studies* does exactly that, and although it could disappoint those who wish for exhaustive close readings of the Bard's plays, the book fills a gap in research nonetheless. Connecting William Shakespeare's girl characters with their adaptational counterparts in late twentieth and early twenty-first century media, Balizet manages to interrogate our ideas on the constructions of girlhood in a wholly inventive manner—by taking into consideration the presence of Shakespeare in the genres of film, television, Young Adult literature, and web series alike. Its exceedingly ambitious scope (and indeed, the sheer amount of material covered) might cause concern for some readers, but Balizet's wide tableau of contemporary representations of Shakespearean girlhood functions in order to answer the question clearly set out in the Introduction: "Who does or does not count as a girl?" (Balizet 3).

Shakespeare and Girls' Studies is a welcome addition to the *Routledge Studies in Shakespeare* series as well as to the author's prior research. Balizet's second book, preceded by *Blood and Home in Early Modern Drama: Domestic Identity on the Renaissance Stage* (Routledge, 2014), is the first large academic study interconnecting girlhood with William Shakespeare—or indeed, as the Introduction points out, with any author (6). First and foremost, its triumph lies in this very act of intersection. The author recognizes the need for Shakespeare in the study of girls as well as the apparent need for girls in the study of Shakespeare and creates an impressive framework in which both fields can be facilitated as scholarly approaches to the other.

Shakespeare and Girls' Studies manages to utilize Shakespeare as a discourse that gives voice to contemporary constructions of being a girl. Taking an interdisciplinary approach via adaptation theory, girl studies, and feminist theory, Balizet opens a walkable path between Shakespearean scholarship and girlhood studies. Even though that alone is no small feat, it is decidedly those interested in girl studies who will find this book especially illuminating—its chapters focus on instances of how Shakespearean media construct girlhood in innovative and unique ways, never coming to the same static conclusion. With its current ideas and interdisciplinary method, the

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book calls for modern readers ready to find unorthodox renderings of all things Shakespearean, while its clear, accessible style of writing (at times even venturing into the non-academic) makes Balizet's volume one that will appeal to the layperson and the scholar alike.

In the Introduction ("A Girls' Studies Approach to Shakespeare and Adaptation"), the first of six chapters, Balizet highlights what she calls the rhizomatic nature of both Shakespeare and girlhood: acknowledging that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of the rhizome befits our idea of Shakespeare and his "fundamentally adaptational nature" (8), she argues that girl as such can also be deemed a rhizomatic category, whose understanding and privilege fluctuates depending on the specific interpersonal and cultural contexts it is used in. With this essential insight, Balizet argues for a similarly rhizomatic network of Shakespeare, his adaptations, and girls, in which all elements "build on and borrow from each other" (8), and the very notion of primariness is refreshingly set aside. The framework visualized in the Introduction is in fact reflected in the democratic structure of the book itself; it is not only Shakespeare and girlhood that inform each other in a rhizomatic fashion, the same can be said of each form of media represented in Balizet's volume, as no hierarchy is established between the different genres. Indeed, it is by the employment of such a rhizomatic structure and the juxtaposition of films and novels or web series, that *Shakespeare and Girls' Studies* yields its most memorable results.

The following four analytical chapters undertake the study of Shakespeare and girl characters. "The End(s) of Girlhood: Film" introduces US federal policy regarding sexual education as its principal apparatus in examining the Shakespeare Boom in Hollywood filmmaking in the 1990s. Balizet sheds light on these "cultural events promoting the concept of 'purity' as a category of identity" (30) for girls, and asserts that the films including *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999), *She's the Man* (2006), *Never Been Kissed* (1999), and *Get Over It!* (2001) function as fantasies "of patriarchal control" over girls' bodies and sexuality (33), while the presence of the Shakespearean plot is most relevant in its authoritative role over girlhood. Examining these four films, Balizet presents Shakespeare's girl characters such as Kat, Bianca, and Viola as being assigned a certain cultural value depending on their relationship to being sexually active, and the patterns she discovers—that these films "negotiate girlhood as a provisional category" (35) in which girls practicing abstinence triumph—mark this chapter as her most thought-provoking one. Following this, "The Big Bad Bard: Television and Small Screens" goes on to investigate the act of alluding to Shakespeare in

contemporary teenage television series, *My So-Called Life* (1994–1995), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), *Gilmore Girls* (2000–2007), *Gossip Girl* (2007–2012), and *Switched at Birth* (2011–2017). Deviating from straightforward adaptations, this chapter highlights "the casual, suggestive citation" of Shakespeare (61) and his narrative function of serving "as an antagonist to girl characters" (62), offering the idea that the presence of Shakespeare as a subject in the classroom signals the weaknesses of girls on American television. In spite of its intriguing stance, the chapter's treatment of minute analyses for so large a number of otherwise unrelated series can be called exhausting as well as exhaustive by the end: as its relentless listing of titles weighs on the reader, the chapter lacks the cohesive power required to make its arguments consistently engaging.

"Time Travelers: Young Adult Fiction" and "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Girls: Web Series" serve the underlying question of the book far more efficiently. Instead of simply reiterating the conclusions at which she has already arrived in her preceding chapters covering film and television, Balizet renegotiates views of both girlhood and Shakespeare as she turns to popular teen content. Whereas chapter 4 restructures the meaning of "Shakespearean" as the kind of cultural property that can be appropriated and recycled as "girlish" (94), the treatment of girlhood in the oncoming chapter, as a category that may be gained, reformed, or even dispensed with when it comes to gender identity, the chapter creates a rhyming scheme within the book, elegantly reflecting on the concept of the rhizome presented in the Introduction. No hierarchical structure is at work here, instead, Shakespeare and girlhood both add to each other: "web series do not borrow *from* Shakespeare but rather catalyze the adaptation of Shakespeare *to* a new ecosystem of pop culture" (132, emphasis in the original). Balizet's ingenious discussion of YouTube adaptations of Shakespeare's plays fundamentally creates the genre of the video blog as a "queer space and time in which young characters actively embrace, reject, and reimagine the cultural frameworks that shape their relationship to girlhood" (134), and in which the trope of dressing up as a boy generates new meanings as it reorganizes our interpretations of gender binarism. In the chapters before, Shakespeare appears as a point of contention and threat for girls, but chapter 5, Balizet's last analytical chapter, emphasizes that in web series such as *Rome and Juliet* or *Like, As It Is*, Shakespeare and his stories emerge as a place of refuge "that encourages the representation of marginalized genders" (139).

It is the final chapter of the book which may make readers ponder on the shortcomings of *Shakespeare and Girls' Studies*. For while its analytical

chapters offer unrelentingly diverse readings of Shakespeare's many roles in contemporary girlhood imagery, the concluding chapter of Balizet's volume, "The Future: Shakespeare and/as Girls' Studies" makes a complete departure from the previous focus on representation and offers a practical guide in the incorporation of girl studies in Shakespeare classes instead. Almost as if the author was afraid of letting her chapters speak for themselves, Balizet's step-by-step case study of teaching *Taming of the Shrew* is, suffice it to say, puzzling. Even though such a direct call to action within the field of girlhood is certainly well-intentioned, the last chapter reveals a certain weakness applicable to the entire book: its elusive relationship with Shakespeare. Albeit its rhizomatic method in merging girlhood with Shakespeare scholarship is logically put and faithfully followed through, Balizet tends to use "Shakespeare" and "Shakespearean" in less than clear terms, referring at certain points to his plays, the man himself, or the Shakespeare machine (encompassing all our knowledge of Shakespeare into a single word) without due explanation. This micro-problem of not fully answering the question of who or what counts as Shakespeare surfaces on a macro level as well, for Balizet's work—rhizomatic as it is—seeks to connect vastly different perspectives and genres in the loosest of ways, with the final pragmatic chapter as a clear stand-out. Leaving behind the realm of cultural analysis and stepping into the practicalities of classroom teaching speaks of a larger issue in girl studies as well, of the fear which a number of academics seem to share: that theoretical discussion is insufficient, and that practical advice must be given, or the scholar shall perish.

Despite its shortcomings, *Shakespeare and Girls' Studies* does not cease to be what it otherwise clearly is: a daring and inventive study successfully making a pathway between Shakespeare and his girl characters. It iterates adaptation in a reinvigorating and democratic fashion, and recaptures girlhood as one of the most inspiring aspects not just in the works of William Shakespeare, but also in our current cultural dialogue. Never static, always diverse, and written in a reader-friendly tone, Ariane M. Balizet's book is a milestone in girlhood studies: it is a girlish book that rewrites Shakespeare, and even more notably, a Shakespeare book that rewrites girlhood.

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