

Bess



By Pamela Brunskill
Illustrated by Chris Jones

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Chapter One



Girls Not Allowed

The year was 1600. Bess Schulman loved the theater. From her home on Fish Street, she could walk over London Bridge to the Globe Theater. That's where Shakespeare's plays were performed. Bess would sit on the wooden benches at the theater with her family to watch. She dreamed of acting in the company. But she knew it couldn't happen. Boys always played the female roles because girls weren't allowed to act.

"It's not fair," Bess told her mother one morning. Her big brother, Robert, had just been chosen to play Puck.





He would be starring in the play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Bess was helping her mother get his costume ready. "Why can't I be in the company, too?"

Mother let out an exasperated sigh—they had had this conversation before. "You know girls aren't allowed to act. What a scandal that would be!"

Bess persisted. "Well, girls should be allowed to act! I would be great in the play! Then, everyone would change their minds about girls acting."

Mother bent down to smooth a spiral of hair from Bess's frustrated face. "Darling, that's not the way the world works. Father would be horrified if he heard what you said. You will grow up and become a wife. Your husband will want someone to run the household. He won't want you to perform onstage! And neither of your parents wants a disobedient child."

Bess dropped her head. She wanted to make her parents proud, so she picked up her needle and thread. She hated sewing, but she dutifully began to stitch vines and flowers together for the crown. She was still stitching when her brother came out of his room and said, "I need to go to rehearsal. Is my costume ready?"

Mother had finished Robert's coat, but Bess wasn't quite done with the crown. Bess asked, "Can I go with Robert and sew while he's rehearsing? As soon as it's ready, I'll give it to him."

Robert said, "It's fine, Mother. I can watch her."

Mother looked at her children. "It can't hurt," she decided. "I know how much you love the theater, and Robert does need his costume."



Bess

Girls aren't allowed to act in Shakespeare's London in 1600. So Bess pretends to be a boy to get a role. When it's showtime, can she let her parents—and the Globe—know it's her?

Reading Levels

Guided Reading: P

DRA Level: 34

Lexile® Level: 570L

121599

ISBN-13: 978-1-0876-0547-0



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