

Player Queens Boy Actors on Shakespeare's Stage

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ABSTRACT

When William Shakespeare created some of the most memorable female roles in all of world theatre he had no realistic possibility that he would ever see those roles played by women. Instead he wrote for young male members of the company, who played female roles. The recruitment and training of these young players, and the ways in which they represented the female characters they played on stage have long been the subject of debate amongst scholars, but all too often the analysis is based upon false premises, informed by unsupported traditions and generalised assumptions rather than analysis.

Key words : Shakespeare; boy actors; training; portrayal of gender; eventual disappearance

Within the structures of Early Modern English society, where literacy was far from widespread, the training of young men for future employment outside the formal educational structures was largely in the hands of the Trade Guilds. Although not directly part of the Guild structure, Shakespeare's company, The Lord Chamberlain's (subsequently King's) Men, had a broadly similar scheme of apprenticeships. Young boys were recruited into the company, apprenticed to the Sharers, such as John Hemminges or Augustin Phillips, and as part of their apprenticeship they played not only page boys and servants, but also the parts of young girls. Whether they played mature female characters such as Cleopatra or Volumnia is another discussion, but they certainly played Juliet and Desdemona,

and when it came to the Comedies they played Viola and Hermia as a matter of course.

While it is easy today to imagine a teenage boy playing Benvolio or Biondello, it is rather more difficult for a modern spectator to imagine a theatre in which Juliet was always played by a young boy. Shakespeare's audience was aware that the actor playing Juliet was a boy, even if the playing was extremely convincing. Given that all of the companies in London operated in the same way, the main point of theatrical comparison was with other young boys playing girls. Perhaps an occasional foreign traveller or a disingenuous visitor from the country would believe it was indeed a girl, but most of the audience knew it was a boy yet found it perfectly acceptable. Within the parameters of the performance the boys were girls. This convention was, in context, unremarkable even though, for modern audiences at least, it raises questions as to how the boys played those girls.

To envisage this requires the unravelling of two strands of preconception, one regarding the experience of the audiences of the time, the other to do with the acting skills and traditions of the performers. In order to enter into the mindset of Shakespeare's original audience, a modern reader has to completely set aside Twenty-First Century ideas about gender. Gender operated very differently in Shakespeare's time, and the actors who portrayed women in the plays were operating against another set of rules. In the societies of Elizabethan and Jacobean England the whole performance of gender¹ was different. In many societies today the prevailing views of gender are largely based upon Early Twentieth Century constructs. To put these constructs in very general terms, there are conventions that certain behaviours are "boyish" and others, very different, are

1 The word performance is used in the sense that Judith Butler describes in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory", in *Theatre Journal* No. 40, (1988), pp 519-531), Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press. This idea is discussed fully in Orgel, S (1996) *Impersonations: The performance of gender in Shakespeare's England*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

appropriate to girls. Transgressing against these codes by either sex, can be punished either through ridicule, social exclusion, or in more extreme cases, bullying, violence or even, in some societies, danger to life. What these codes contain has² varied somewhat with the passage of time, or in specific cultural contexts, but there are still certain traits in common. Boys are expected to be louder and more boisterous, and qualities such as strength and toughness are favoured in the upbringing of males, whereas girls are expected to be quieter, more demure, and to be more empathetic and emotionally expressive. Boys are discouraged from being too emotional, or from crying. Those traits are seen as traits of “girlish” behaviour. These codes are often reinforced through dress from the very earliest ages, even while a baby is still on the Maternity Ward. Boys are expected to wear blue, girls to wear pink, for example (although it was the other way round until the late Nineteenth Century). Boys wear trousers, and play football, girls wear dresses and play with dolls. Parents give boys cars and toy toolkits, girls are given prams and toy kitchen utensils. While this is a generalisation, the basic pattern is widely observable. But in the Sixteenth Century these ideas had not taken root.

Initially every young child was dressed in the same clothes. In Shakespeare's time both boys and girls wore dresses. Boys wore dresses for their first few years, until they were “breeched”, given their first set of masculine clothes, in a ceremony which over the years grew into a significant rite of passage. Boys would be given gifts and money at this time, in the way that Catholic children nowadays receive money for a First Communion or Jewish children for a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. In their earliest years it was virtually impossible to tell the boys from the girls. The dressing of young boys in the manner of girls persisted until

2 This section draws upon Skipper, Y and Fox, C (2022) “Boys will be boys: Young people's perceptions and experiences of gender within education” in *Pastoral Care in Education*, Vol. 40, Issue 4, 391-409, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02643944.2021.1977986> and also “Peer Socialization of gender in young boys and girls” in the “Research & Policy” section of *The Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development*, available <https://share.google/FLz5ADw8oTLIqcjzp>

this author's father's time, in the 1920s. This was the case in England, but also in other countries. Velasquez painted a portrait of the heir to the Spanish throne as a young boy in a dress.



Crown Prince Balthasar of Spain, painted by Velasquez, (1663)

The FDR Presidential Library and Museum holds a number of photographs of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, later American President, so dressed as a young child. But even after breeching, the behaviour of young boys and girls was not expected to be as strongly differentiated as is the case now. A young man might be praised for his beauty in exactly the same terms as a young woman. A young man might blush or burst into tears without censure. In later centuries such behaviour in a boy came to be derided as “effeminate”, but the Elizabethans and Jacobean used that word in a different way. A young man in love might be described as behaving in a manner which was considered “effeminate”, such as Romeo: “O sweet Juliet, thy beauty hath made me effeminate”. (*Romeo and Juliet*, III,i) Indeed in other plays of Shakespeare, effeminacy is also invoked, but it is specifically described as pertaining to the actions of lovers, such as Mark Antony, made “effeminate” by his love for Cleopatra. It was not to behave in what might nowadays be referred to as a “girlish” fashion, because the word was not applied in that way, it meant to behave in a languorous and besotted fashion, particularly in relation to indecision.

Young boys might, if they were lucky, and their parents could afford it, attend some sort of school. Sending girls to school was not unknown, but was generally considered a waste. Girls were only sent to the most elementary of schools. Where schooling took place, and it was by no means universal, it began with “Dame Schools” or “Petty Schools”, which might take a child up to, at the very oldest, ten years of age. Here the child would learn basic literacy and Christian catechism. A small minority would attend Grammar School, where they would primarily learn Latin, and sometimes Greek, until around fourteen. The elite would then go on to Oxford or Cambridge. But the tiny percentage who did this were extremely privileged. Those others, who either did not attend school at all, who only attended Dame or Petty School, or those who, as we assume about Shakespeare himself, attended as far as Grammar School, were expected, as soon as they were free to do so, to help their families by earning a living. The lucky ones might hope to become apprentices within the appropriate structures. Apprenticeship was the accepted way of learning any craft or trade. A boy from a non-aristocratic background might hope, if he were lucky, to become an apprentice in order to learn to make his way in the world. The Trade Guilds, as the gatekeepers of these traditions, guarded their privileges and rights of entry jealously, but also protected their members faithfully.

Some of the senior members of Shakespeare's company were members of those Guilds. John Hemminges, for example, was a member of the Greengrocer's Guild, Robert Armin a member of the Goldsmiths. Although Stage Players were not a Guild as such, and while it was not necessary to be a member of a Guild to take on an apprentice, these young actors were apprenticed in a very similar way. They were personally allocated to the leading members of the companies, and were trained in performance. Their training was constant, they lived, like most apprentices, with their masters, they worked in the playhouses or toured the highways of the kingdom day after day, year after year, and they were being guided and instructed

by the best actors of their day, including William Shakespeare himself. Although the gender stricture had slightly begun to change by Shakespeare's time, and there are a few records of women who became members of the Guilds, apprenticeship was almost exclusively available to boys,

Indeed the term "boy" was often used as an alternative to "apprentice", including reference to some of those who would nowadays be classified as adults. In subsequent centuries the term "boy" for a servant took on a large element of racial overtones and has now been dropped from ordinary usage, but up until the Twentieth Century "boy" could be applied to a servant who might be older than the person addressing him as such. Although many critics make assumptions concerning their ages, it is unsafe to be too dogmatic in deciding how old these "boys" were.

Colin MacInnes wrote his novel, *Three Years to Play* (1970), predicated upon the assumption that boys acted the girl's parts only for a short time in their middle teens, from thirteen to sixteen, and in so doing merely distilled the prevailing assumptions of commentators such as Nagler (*Shakespeare's Stage*, 1958). W. Robertson Davies' book *Shakespeare's Boy Actors* (1939) is a full and serious exploration of the subject, however at odds with modern scholarship, although he is surprisingly dismissive of the demands of many of Shakespeare's leading ladies, seeing Lady Macbeth as "well within the scope of a boy actor of sixteen" (Davies, 1939, p128) and Cleopatra the same (p132), which might surprise many highly respected and award laden actresses who have laboured to do the roles justice. Nagler takes a different view, but he too is very dismissive of the boys' contribution:

"... the mere fact that, while Burbage played Macbeth an adolescent impersonated Lady Macbeth seems to me to exclude any possibility of realism. A lad of sixteen could not possibly have played Lady Macbeth realistically. There was only one way to make the figure credible: stylization....the adult portrayer of Romeo ... and the apprentice disguised as Juliet...must be reduced to a common

denominator, and this common denominator can only be style..."

(Nagler, 1958, p81)

There is a lot to disagree with here.

Setting aside the assumption that the aim of the actors in Shakespeare's day was to achieve "realism", the assumption that "A lad of sixteen" (ibid) played Lady Macbeth is by no means certain. The actor who played Lady Macbeth might have been an adolescent, but might equally have been what would nowadays be classified as a young adult, as indeed might the actors playing Regan or Goneril, as even Davies acknowledges (1939, pp126-7). He could indeed have been an adult actor, as has been the case in many of the world's classical theatre traditions throughout history, in Ancient Athens, Japan, China, India or elsewhere.

Bypassing that controversy and focussing solely upon the putative age of a young male actor of female roles, Nagler's assumption that the boy would have been sixteen is based upon modern preconceptions. In the present day many boys' voices break around the age of twelve or thirteen, and almost all will have done so by sixteen. But boys' voices today break far earlier than they did in Shakespeare's England. Joy Leslie Gibson (2000, pp 66-7) discusses this matter with the Choirmaster of Durham Cathedral, where they have records of choirboys going back to 1560, which demonstrate that boys' voices broke several years later in Shakespeare's time. Sixteen was the average. She also quotes the early music specialist Gustav Leonhardt, in claiming that one of the reasons for this is that people today eat far more protein than the Elizabethans, and that a lower protein diet would have delayed the breaking of boys' voices (ibid). Elizabethan boys' voices might break at sixteen, eighteen, or even later. "In the late 15th Century, boys of Edward IV's choir were sent to University [at the age of 18] *if their voices had broken*" (Gibson, 2000, p67, her italics). The implication is that even at this stage some boys' voices had not broken. Some boys have lighter voices quite naturally. It is not impossible that boys might have reached twenty before their voices broke. But while the few

scholars to look closely at this matter have seen the breaking of the voice as a crucial change, it is by no means certain that it was.

What no-one has so far done is to make any effort to argue that a broken voice would preclude a man playing a young female role. It certainly did not preclude an *onnagata* such as Bando Tamasaburo giving a totally believable performance as a young woman, while aged sixty seven, in a Kabuki performance which this author attended in Tokyo in 2017. An ability to change one's voice, and to sound other than you are, is one of the most important elements in an actor's toolkit, and if the actor in question has already had a number of years' experience of playing female roles, it is quite naturally possible to adopt a feminine sounding voice.

The boys who were apprenticed to the players and trained primarily to play female roles in the plays. The reasons for this are clouded by many years of misapprehension and conjecture. There had been actresses in the Medieval English theatre³, and actresses were widespread elsewhere in Europe. Contrary to widespread popular belief it was never illegal for women to appear on stage in England. Glynne Wickham, whose still unsurpassed *Early English Stages* (1959) represents the towering body of knowledge upon which generations of scholars have depended, states that, after a lifetime of study of the subject and years of diligent and comprehensive search "I know of no decree, either ecclesiastical or civic which specifically forbids women to act" (1959, p271f). If women did not act on the public stage very often in Shakespeare's time, the reasons must be sought elsewhere⁴. That specific topic is beyond the scope of this article, but the fact that women did not act in the companies on those London stages created a whole theatrical culture of young men and boys who earned their living playing members of the opposite sex. So the questions as to how they did so must be explored.

3 See Wickham (op. cit), Orgel (op. cit) and many others, such as Stokes, J "Women and Performance in Medieval and Early Modern Suffolk" (op. cit)

4 For a more detailed discussion of this, see Stokes (op. cit)

Many of the boys were highly skilled at playing girls. If they were not, Shakespeare and his contemporaries would never have entrusted to them, among the admittedly conventionalised and somewhat two dimensional characters which also appear, such multi-faceted and complex characters as Rosalind, Viola, Portia, Juliet and possibly, although not indisputably, Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra. To do so they were assisted by costumes, wigs and makeup, but they were also dependent upon vocal skills and acting techniques.

The old assumption, that the apprentices were primarily boys of around thirteen or fourteen, is not safe. Nathan Field, a very famous boy actor, began training at thirteen, and it is quite probable that this was a normal age to begin an apprenticeship with Shakespeare's company. Some may have begun their apprenticeship earlier or later, but taking Field as an example one can assume that thirteen is not a unique age for a boy to be taken into the company as an apprentice. Other documents relating to the terms of normal apprenticeships show an agreement binding a boy to his master for seven years, which would take him up to the age of twenty. Many present day drama students are around this age, but within the English conservatoire system they seldom give public performances of complete plays until their final year. At the same time they have to master the skills needed to perform a global repertoire, extending back two and a half thousand years. They also have to master the techniques required by a range of different media. These Elizabethan apprentices were working on full professional productions for seven years, day



Nathan Field

in, day out. The Elizabethan boy actors were only required to master one kind of acting. Within the specific limits of their own theatre, in terms of depth rather than breadth, they were far more experienced than modern drama students, at the same age.

So some of the boys could be up to twenty or twenty-one years old, and by that stage be highly trained actors with quite a lot of experience. These boys were very good at what they did, to be trusted with roles which modern actresses still find amongst the most challenging in the repertoire. Between them they played roles as different as Juliet, Joan La Pucelle, Helena, Cressida, Desdemona, Imogen (or Innogen), Perdita, Isabella, Viola, Portia, Kate, Rosalind, Olivia, Miranda, Cordelia. The list goes on. The way these characters were enacted, by male actors in female costumes and wigs, was stylistically similar to the way in which male characters were represented. Richard Burbage as Hamlet and the boy playing Ophelia performed within the same set of stylistic conventions. It is important also to stress that young actors, with proper care, preparation and guidance, can be highly accomplished in a wide range of roles. This author spent several years working on a BBC television series with young actors from early to late teens, and some of them were capable of extremely detailed and emotionally nuanced performances. This might have seemed inconceivable to Nagler, but it will not surprise modern audiences who have, as the Elizabethans did, many opportunities to see highly skilled young professionals on stage and screen. If they had not been good enough to hold up their end of scenes with Richard Burbage Shakespeare would have considerably reduced the requirements of the female roles in his plays.

Finally, Nagler uses the word “style” to describe the only way an adult male and a boy could act together. Style is of course central in any performance of any play. Achieving a unity of style between the actors is often a primary purpose of rehearsal. Style could, of course, be defined as stylization, but stylization carries connotations of excess and artificiality. This is by no means necessary to achieve unity of style.

Richard Burbage as Hamlet and the boy playing Ophelia performed within the same set of stylistic conventions. Every performance, then and now, sets out to find its own appropriate style. Nagler assumes "realism" as an intention, or as part of that style, but no actor in Shakespeare's day would have recognised what is nowadays termed "realism" in a theatrical context as being either achievable or desirable in the portrayal of roles in verse drama in an open-air auditorium in front of three thousand people.

There is another aspect to the representation of women on the stage in Shakespeare's theatre where law and social conventions assisted greatly. Throughout history different societies have enacted Sumptuary Laws, which defined the sort of clothing, the cuts and fabrics, which could be worn by different categories and classes in society. In practice these laws were almost impossible to enforce, as can be seen by the frequent need to pass new ones. Indeed one of the criticisms levelled at Players was that they dressed in ways to which they were not entitled, and as things which they were not. If a Duke was not instantly recognisable as being different from a mere yeoman, critics might say, the very fabric of society might be under threat. But it also worked the other way. Whatever you appeared to be, there was an expectation that was what you were. Of course this is an underlying assumption beneath most theatre traditions. Someone who appears to be a king is accepted as a king. Someone who appears to be a beggar is supposed to be a beggar, at least initially. Of course the beggar may turn out to be a king in disguise in a play, by throwing aside his defining garments and revealing himself.⁵ From there it is a comparatively short step to saying that whoever appears to be a girl is accepted as being a girl. There is more to it than that, but the Elizabethan theatre abounds with examples of a character putting on a hooded cloak and becoming unrecognisable to their own family

5 This did happen in life as well as art. James V, the grandfather of Shakespeare's King James, was well known for disguising himself as low-born characters to travel around his kingdom, seeking to understand his people, although also, reportedly, for amorous adventures

members. If someone walked onto the stage at the Globe Theatre or the Rose or Swan in a dress, with a wig, dressed as a lady, that person was accepted as such. From there on it was down to the actor's skills to play well or badly.

In Shakespeare's plays there are five examples of female characters disguising themselves as males. Rosalind, Viola, Portia, Imogen, and Julia all disguise themselves as males, for various reasons inherent in their stories. There are only three plays in which male characters disguise themselves as women. One is Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, where the portrayal is grotesque, another is Francis Flute playing Thisbe in the play-within-the-play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The other play in question is *The Taming of The Shrew*, and while this was the case in Shakespeare's time it very seldom happens in modern productions. In the opening scenes of Shakespeare's play a group of Players arrive, in his time an all-male troupe, and decide to put on a performance to play a trick upon Christopher Sly, a drunken tinker. One boy actor goes offstage to change into Katherine, while another changes there and then into a disguise as the supposed wife of Sly. Thus the artifice is pointed out in full view of the audience. Many, if not most, modern productions ignore this, but it is a crucial part of understanding what Shakespeare is doing with the play. The story of Katherine and Petruchio is not to be taken at face value.

There used to be a belief that Shakespeare's heroines disguising themselves as boys was a way to make it easier to cover up any shortcomings in the representations of female characters by the actors, but this is clearly not the case. Shakespeare wrote very demanding roles for the very same actors where they remain as female characters throughout the plays. Shakespeare's use of this masquerade as a boy raises questions of the boundaries of gender, particularly in *As You Like It*, where a boy playing a girl plays a boy pretending to be a girl, a four-level equation which really tests the limitations of commonplace definitions. But he does not do this in the opposite direction. He does not have a male character test the boundaries of his

sex by impersonating his opposite, other than in a context of disguise or play-within-a-play performance when the artifice is apparent for all in the audience to see.

The audiences knew that the girls were played by boys, but actually enjoyed and admired them in their roles, and admired the characters which they played. To give but one example, Samuel Pepys reminisced that Ned Kynaston “made the loveliest lady that ever I saw in my life” (quoted in Wickham, Vo. 2, p139). It comes as no surprise that the Puritans found all sorts of moral concerns in the playing of female roles by boys. The assumption was that the boys dressing as girls would corrupt the said youths, and that those youths would grow up to adopt same-sex passions. While it would be fatuous to suggest that such things never happened, it was not a widespread criticism, and indeed a number of documented cases show boy actors maturing into actors of male roles in adulthood, and marrying and having families. The list is long. Alexander (or Sander) Cooke, Dickie Robinson, John Rice, Nicholas Tooley and a number of their fellows all did so, without any opprobrium or gossiping inuendo.

The boys were good at what they did, they were vital in Shakespeare's theatre, but they disappeared. There are a number of factors involved in this. The closure of the theatres during the English Civil War in 1642, and the disbanding of the companies, cut off the supply of apprentices. When the Court returned from exile in France in 1660 they had spent eighteen years watching a very different sort of theatre, indoor theatre as exemplified by Moliere and his contemporaries, where actresses were a permanent fixture, as indeed they were in Italy and Spain. Charles II issued a patent in 1662/3 saying

“That whereas the women's parts in plays have hitherto been acted by men in the habits of women, at which some have taken offence, we permit and give leave for the time to come, that all women's parts be acted by women” (quoted in Wickham, Vol 2, p139)

While this introduced a veritable host of highly talented actresses into the world of theatre, it also meant that the boys, who had served faithfully for as long as they were able, were now lost to the profession which they had graced for decades, and for whom Shakespeare had created some of his most memorable characters. Shakespeare's boy actors are nowadays reduced to a backwater of history, seen as a quaint anomaly, holding a place until actresses were able to come along. But when Shakespeare wrote he had no way of foreseeing the future. He wrote for the actors he knew, and he wrote his female characters for the boy actors who would play them, secure in the knowledge that they could certainly do so with distinction.

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