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McCarthy, Harry R.

Boy Actors in Early Modern England: Skill and Stagecraft in the Theatre.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pp. xvii, 244. ISBN 978-1-009-09895-3 (hardcover) £75.

Boy actors played a crucial role in public and private theatres in early modern London and in the shaping of early modern plays in England. McCarthy's excellent book makes a significant contribution and offers an altogether fresh approach to the boys' role in the history of drama and performance. The book continues the line of McCarthy's research and writing about boy acting, already demonstrated in his engaging and novel study, *Performing Early Modern Drama Beyond Shakespeare: Edward's Boys*, published in the Cambridge Elements series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). This monograph casts a bright new light on the demands and of boy actors' performance within the conditions of theatres and the practices of playwriting. The focus is on the body—the sporty body, we might say—of the boy actor, not so much on the organization of boy companies. The book is “less interested in audience response—gender-inflected and otherwise” (18), yet it implicitly and excitingly raises questions about the gendered performances of boys. McCarthy has unearthed a plethora of new records of a miscellaneous kind that reveals the complexity and rigour of the structured system through which boys were apprenticed and promoted on their path to stage performance. The book also, in turn, displays much about what it was like—how hard it was—to be a talented boy in this unique system of acting.

More broadly, this book provides new and direct evidence about what boyhood was like in the early modern English society. We learn a lot about the relationship between stagecraft and boy acting as well as about “early modern culture's widespread fascination with the bodily potential and physical activity of early modern boys” (27). That the theatrical fascination with boys as actors might have been especially peculiar to England at that time might also say something to modern readers about early modern English attraction to the boy as a social and cultural figure. This attraction might have been conditioned by “the widespread cultural interest in the youthful capacity for action” (56). The scholarly fascination and enthusiasm for this research, evident in McCarthy's engaging critical prose and argument, comes out of the fact that boy actors' “physical labour” (63) has escaped attention of critics, and so his book marks a

major move in studying the relationship between that labour and an inextricable part of the artistic labour of playing a part in stage drama. Playwrights like Ben Jonson, John Marston, William Shakespeare, Francis Beaumont, George Chapman, and John Lyly, are some of the authors whose plays provide rich evidence for reconstructing boy actors' practices and skills from within drama itself, not just externally from the archives of early modern English drama.

In his first chapter, McCarthy explores "the bodily potential and physical activity" (27) of the youth talented for stage performance. He mines a range of primary documents, including "legal and anecdotal records of [...] boys" (35), between the ages of twelve and twenty-two, who were apprentices to sharers in theatre companies. He is right to "let boy actors [...] speak for themselves" (59) about their physical and theatrical ability.

In his second chapter, McCarthy provides new evidence, by way of Thomas Heywood, in support of the argument for a "greater degree of audience familiarity" (81) with boy players. McCarthy reconstructs effectively the audience's perception of the physical ability of boys to perform dramatic parts on stage, by scrutinizing texts of the plays. The subject of the third chapter is the correlation between the staging of sport in boy company repertoires and the resilience of the boys in undertaking the strenuousness of their tasks on stage, especially with regards to the "movement and modulation of the body" (105). A great virtue of McCarthy's writing in this densely researched scholarly monograph comes from the occasional excursus of his own first-hand experience of working with modern-day boy actors, especially his involvement in the staging of John Marston's play *What You Will*. There are other moments of this personal research-in-performance activity that feeds directly into his understanding of the relationship between physical activity and theatre, and more generally, of the astonishingly and refreshingly rich potential of boy actors in creating stage performance.

The fourth chapter is devoted to an analysis of Elizabethan plays in which the correspondence of verbal and physical energy in the performance of boy actor produces "star roles" (147), roles memorable for their "kinetic" (149) vitality and the linguistic force that conceptualize drama. The verbal and the physical outperform one another in the boys' display of their roles in action, and several plays are used as a good test case for illustrating this creative relationship engendered by the boys. *Antony and Cleopatra* by Shakespeare, *Dido, Queen of Carthage* by Marlowe and Lyly's *The Woman in the Moon*, all feature

immensely eloquent and kinetically agile and forceful female parts. In this regard, McCarthy is right to insist that a more fruitful question for the history of performance is not who the boy who played Cleopatra could have been but rather what resources and what kind of “actor’s physicality” (149) the boy who played Cleopatra could have brought to the performance of Cleopatra when we study the currents and kinds of influence and imitation that go beyond the verbal, when we study boy actors. This chapter provides us with an astute and original interpretation of how boy actors performed three of the greatest female parts played by boys, Cleopatra, Dido, and Pandora (in Lyly’s play). The boys who played these parts conveyed with skill physically demanding parts. They were also able to produce complex “movement sequences” (207) both individually and in collaboration and interaction with other boy actors. The book provides much useful evidence about other physical and verbal capacity of boy actors that enhanced boys’ performances, like artificial hair, wigs, and headtires.

Students and scholars of early modern English drama, history of theatre, history of performance, but also of early modern gender and sexuality, and those interested in the socio-cultural history of boyhood in early modern England, will find this book of much use and a pleasure to read. Future students of teenage and adolescent masculinity, gender, and queer early modern embodiment, as well as trans early modern criticism, will also benefit from engaging in a scholarly dialogue with this volume.

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