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Alison Findlay

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# “If I were a woman”: the performativity of gender in Shakespeare

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For Rosemary

- 1 The words “If I were a woman,” from the epilogue of *As You Like It* are doubtless familiar to us all for “disputing sexual difference” by advertising the gender fluidity of “who is speaking,” as Catherine Belsey’s fine article put it, way back in 1985.<sup>1</sup> The boy actor speaks from the edge of the play, a risky but vibrant borderland between Arden and auditorium to announce:

If I were a woman, I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased me, complexions that liked me, and breaths that I defied not; and, I am sure, as many as have good beards, or good faces, or sweet breaths, will, for my kind offer, when I make curtsy, bid me farewell. (5.4 204-9)<sup>1</sup>

- 2 There is, as Touchstone has just reminded us, much virtue in “If” – in fact this play features the word more prominently than any other text in the canon.<sup>2</sup>
- 3 The provisionality and the precarity of gender categories advertised by the epilogue has become ever more pertinent in today’s culture where transgender has emerged as the newest phenomena in a post-structural playground. Queerness was foregrounded and celebrated in Northern Broadsides’ 2022 production of *As You Like It* whose designer E. M. Parry observes:

In our version of Arden, when the characters escape to the forest, they go through a wardrobe, Narnia-like, into a giant dressing-up box of queer possibility, a place where time, gender, sexuality, love, class, and all the hierarchies and binaries of identity and power can be questioned and turned upside down.<sup>3</sup>

Figure 1: Northern Broadsides *As You Like It*, dir. Laurie Samson, designed by E. M. Parry (March 2022)



- 4 Parry explains the eclectic mixture of costume styles which blur, collapse or overlay historical references as an “act of queer resistance”, important to those “who identify – or are identified – as queer, by choice or by force,” because they deliberately subvert an expected linear chronology which assimilates lived queer experiences into heteronormative measuring of lives by calendrical and religious patterns of reproductive marriage. Parry’s designs thus aim to question “what and who gets written into and out of history and memory.”
- 5 Northern Broadsides is not alone in its promotion of gender inclusivity to attract much-needed audiences to Shakespeare, as Sawyer K. Kemp has pointed out. Broadsides’ production featured non-binary performers and creatives, but such practices are not universal, and Kemp argues that without a holistic dramaturgy of transgender Shakespeare performance, such rhetoric is empty.<sup>4</sup> As a result “living, non-fictional, self-identified trans people thus have both a privileged and completely disposable relationship to the bard.” Kemp regards the long tradition of criticism on cross-dressing in Shakespeare as part of the problem because it reads androgyny and gender queerness “*from the performance of a cisgender body*”. Boy actors, according to Kemp, are provocative and problematic sites of investigation because “the scholar already ‘knows’ what they ‘really are’”.<sup>5</sup>
- 6 My article tries to address Kemp’s concerns, albeit from my cisgender identity, by rethinking the performativity of gender in Shakespeare’s plays from the perspective of the boy actors who were suspended in the transient position evoked by the words “If I were a woman.” This is necessarily speculative because we cannot “know” who they “really are” but I will argue that Shakespeare’s scripts<sup>6</sup> register the emotional experiences of boy actors so vividly as to recreate lived experiences of gender androgyny that goes far beyond a performative fiction of genderqueerness. I think we need to revisit just how radical original Shakespearean performances like that of the actor who plays Rosalind are. Judith Butler’s preface to the tenth anniversary edition of

*Gender Trouble* points out that when we move from drag to transsexuality, "one is no longer sure whether the body encountered is that of a man or a woman" and it is "no longer possible to derive a judgment about stable anatomy from the clothes that cover and articulate the body."<sup>7</sup> The image of Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton in his teens captures this ambiguity.

Figure 2: Portrait of Southampton in his teens c.1590-1593 attributed to John De Critz (Wikimedia Commons)



- 7 In early modern performances, the figure of the adolescent actor creates transsexuality of the type Butler describes. Rosalind's performance as Ganymede can be read in the fictional world of the play in terms of a binary "original" (Rosalind) – "Do you not know I am a woman? When I think, I must speak" (3.2.230-1) – with Ganymede as an illusory "simile", but in an early modern performance, the so-called "reality" of the pubescent male body of the actor is a third term that inverts and destabilizes the binary so that "one is no longer sure whether the body encountered is that of a man or a woman."<sup>8</sup> Who is speaking when the actor playing Rosalind playing Ganymede assures Oliver that sh/e "counterfeits" to be a man but "I should have been a woman by right" (4.1.172-3)?
- 8 Dympna Callaghan points out the complexities created by this situation:
 

The paradox of representation is that it both produces and occludes subjectivities and while it may service the production and reproduction of subjectivities, it cannot wholly determine them. Representation exerts a pull on subjectivity, which can be variously, or even simultaneously, coercive and disciplinary, seductive and enthralling.<sup>9</sup>
- 9 The tension between seduction and enthrallment, producing and occluding subjectivities, applies perfectly to the experience of the adolescent actors performing female roles in Shakespeare's plays. Critical and practical work has drawn attention to the complex craft of fashioning gender that they undertook. Roberta Black examined

overlaps between the construction and performance of gender by the "boy actresses" John Price and Richard Robinson of Shakespeare's company and the courtly ladies in masque.<sup>10</sup> Juliet Dusinberre's brilliant essay "Women and Boys Playing Shakespeare" asks "Why should it matter that they are not biologically female...? Why should the fact of the male body make it impossible to conceive of a woman on the stage, any more than the fact of the commoner's body might make it impossible to conceive of Richard II's body? Both are figments of the actor's art."<sup>11</sup> Harry McCarthy's excellent book *Boy Actors in Early Modern England: Skill and Stagecraft in the Theatre* has provided a sustained consideration of the physical demands made of boy actors in the early modern period, drawing on practice-based research.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, the series of productions by Perry Mills's company "Edward's Boys" has suggested the dynamic between players in a boys' company, including the playing of female roles.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, Martin Wiggins' "Reading Early Plays" project develops a growing understanding of the professional dynamics within Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men (later the King's Men), and the progression of particular players within it taking account of age, status in the apprentice hierarchy or as sharers.<sup>14</sup> In contrast to these valuable contributions to the debate, my article concentrates on the emotional experiences of boy players in adult companies, first through an examination of archival research and then with reference to Shakespeare's scripts. Although important work on coming of age in Shakespeare has studied the emotional and economic challenges of transitioning from child to adult, the particular case of adolescent actors in the adult companies has not been scrutinized. I will argue that the scripts self-consciously register the difficulties of transitioning into and out of "the woman's part" for the players involved, representing it as a hard process rather than an instant transformation.

- 10 Our knowledge about the boy actors who worked in the adult professional playing companies has been invaluablely enhanced by the archival work of David Kathman, and Peter Blayney and David Mateer on the livery companies or guilds.<sup>15</sup> The 1562 Act, as David Kathman pointed out, codified the practices of apprenticeship operating in London, stating that freemen of the livery companies such as the guild of Drapers, Grocers or Goldsmiths, and any householder over twenty-four who was master of "any Arte ... or Manuall Occupacion" could bind apprentices. Under the terms of the act, apprentices were not allowed to marry; were not to be bound before the age of fourteen or after the age of twenty-four, and were bound for minimum of seven years. In practice, this meant that twenty-one was the age at which London apprentices were commonly freed, although the 1562 Act formally decreed it should be twenty-four. Although William Trigge (who played Julia in *The Roman Actor*) tried to dispute the terms of his twelve-year apprenticeship to John Heminges on account of his age, exact ages and timespans were difficult to enforce in law: work by Peter Blayney on the Wardens Accounts (which are themselves incomplete), reveal, for example, that John Heminges, the business manager of Shakespeare's companies, was only eleven when he himself was bound and, during his long career with the Lord Chamberlain's Men (later the King's Men) he bound ten apprentices for varying periods between eight and twelve years, many of whom can be identified as playing female roles. Existing apprenticeship systems provided a good means to train boy actors for the London theatre companies (which had no official guild) since any actor or sharer who was a freeman could legally bind and free apprentices into his livery company or "occupation" and train his apprentices in his actual profession of acting and producing theatre. Thus, for example, John Lowin and Robert Armin, freemen of the Goldsmiths' Company, could

theoretically apprentice and train boy actors and free them as Goldsmiths, without the apprentice "ever having handled a piece of gold."<sup>16</sup>

- 11 For boy actors recruited to play female roles, literary competence (a requirement of all apprentices no matter what their trade), along with an ability to act, to look and sound like a woman, made practical sense of a younger age of apprenticeship at fourteen. Patrick Wallis points out that "training and work were virtually indistinguishable" in apprenticeships across the livery companies, so "apprentices were typically recruited for their immediate abilities and thrust straight into the job." Moreover, "the burden of acquiring a craft was put on the apprentice's diligence in observing and particularly practising skills."<sup>17</sup> Boy actors recruited at about fourteen could thus learn the specialist skill of playing women's parts by practising with their masters and with older apprentices and, in addition, observe the skills of older members of the company acting adult male roles and producing theatre.<sup>18</sup> Such boys would be twenty-one if they completed their seven years of service, which, as Wallis observes, "might outrun the period of training."<sup>19</sup> In effect, a boy actor apprenticed to play women's parts who continued to serve would have literally "mastered" the most complex of those roles by the time he reached the age of twenty or twenty one, and was quite ready to teach apprentices himself.
- 12 Lengths of apprenticeships were flexible, and further variation was created by other contracts of service that existed between boy-players and master actors. David Mateer's discovery of a 1597 legal dispute between Edward Alleyn of the Admirals' Men (as master) and the actor Richard Perkins, reveals that Perkins was indentured as a covenant servant on 28 November 1596 for three years, rather than the seven for apprentices, but broke his contract by leaving Alleyn after only four months.<sup>20</sup> As Mateer points out, servants were legally bound to their masters and were normally retained by the year. Contracts of this type would presumably have given an adult actor (whether a guild member or not) the opportunity to test out the acting abilities of boys on a very flexible basis. In Shakespeare's company, the absence of apprenticeship records in cases like that of Heminges and his "boy" John Rice, may not be due to gaps in the records but to the use of contracts of indentured service instead. Augustine Philips, for example, distinguished between Samuel Gilburne "my late apprentice" and "my servant" Christopher Beeston in his will, as John Astington observes.<sup>21</sup>
- 13 Robert Barrie proposes that covenant servants, impressed apprentices and parish apprentices experienced very different sorts of work arrangements from the co-operative relationship between master and apprentice living and working together over many years.<sup>22</sup> Barrie argues that Philip Henslowe's diary notes about his "boy" James Bristow suggest Henslowe "viewed Bristow himself as a tradeable commodity":<sup>23</sup>
- [antony Jeaffes & the company dothe owe vnto me for my boye Jeames Bristo wages from the 23 of Aprell 1600 w<sup>ch</sup> Robart shawe hath geuen his word for the payment]  
wittnes Richard Jonnes Thomas Towne.<sup>24</sup>
- 14 Henslowe is expecting income from the actor Antony Jeffes and the Admiral's Men for Robert Bristow's services, though whether Bristow saw the "wages" himself is not specified. The valuations of £30 for Stephen Hammerton in 1632 and £40 for John Thompson in 1635 show that boy actors remained valuable commodities.<sup>25</sup> In some cases, commodification may have been marks of the star status of boy performers. Dekker's *The Gull's Hornbook* points out the advantage of paying to sit on the stage to

"purchase the dear acquaintance of the boys," suggesting that those who played the women's parts may have been advertising their attractions as young males even as they played female roles.<sup>26</sup> Much earlier, in 1578, the boy actors John and Augustine Hind, who were indentured by their father to perform twice weekly in James Burbage's company,<sup>27</sup> were appropriated for an aristocratic performance, provoking litigation, showing again "how important boy players could be in the theatrical economy" as Richard Dutton observes.<sup>28</sup> For many boy players, however, Barrie is probably right in arguing that parish apprenticeship and indentured service often meant unpaid bondage and little hope for social or financial improvement.<sup>29</sup>

- 15 The commodification of all boys and youths "bound" to work in the theatre creates an inevitable pull on subjectivity (to use Dymphna Callaghan's terms): while they service the production of future subjectivities on stage, which may enthrall, they do so as subjects who are themselves enthralled or coerced to do so by a strictly commercial framework. Daniel Viktus and Andrew Gurr have read Ariel and Caliban's contrasting terms of service and eventual release by Prospero as a metaphor for theatrical apprenticeship,<sup>30</sup> and Jared Johnson examines Ferdinand as a more willing indentured servant.<sup>31</sup> Stanley Wells, Scott McMillan, John H. Astington, Roberta Black and Harry McCarthy, among others, have likewise drawn on the archival research to sketch in a little more about the working lives of the boy actors and probable responses to them.<sup>32</sup> The few descriptions of boy actors in action record a variety of effects. Henry Jackson's account of a performance (probably by John Rice) expresses total belief in the female persona: "the celebrated Desdemona, slain in our presence by her husband [...] pleaded her case very effectively throughout, yet moved (us) more after she was dead" and "entreated the pity of the spectators by her very countenance."<sup>33</sup> In complete contrast, Lady Mary Wroth's narrative voice condemns the attempt of "a play-boy gaudily dressed up to show a fond woman's part,"<sup>34</sup> an attitude in which, Richard Dutton comments, "The boy actor remained a boy for all his skill in appearing womanly."<sup>35</sup>
- 16 How did the boy actors who played women's parts feel about their gender and their work? In addition to condemnations of cross dressing as a demonic abomination from puritan commentators, they were surrounded by a complex network of economic and cultural cross-currents, celebrating them as outstandingly skilled musicians and performers on one hand and, on the other, subjecting them to the control of a master and the desiring gazes of actors and spectators. In the absence of a first-hand account of what it felt like to play the woman's part, scenes within plays, like those with Quince's company in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, are probably the closest we can get to a sense of the "original practice" of playing a woman. Flute strongly objects to playing the role of Thisbe: "let me not play a woman: I have a beard coming" (1.2.43-4). His dislike of the woman's role may be an expression of anxiety about its emasculating effect — he wants to play a "wandering knight", or perhaps because of what it signified about his status. Robert Barrie argues that boys who occupied the position of indentured servants "were assigned female roles because such roles, whatever their dramatic importance, were rejected by free men."<sup>36</sup> Flute's assigned role often produces mocking laughter from his fellows on stage, reinforcing the sense that female roles are a source of shame. However, those who continued in the woman's part for the full term of their apprenticeship must have developed stronger skills in appearing womanly, and possibly stronger emotional ties to the female identities they personated. Did the boy actor still remain a boy in such cases? Could lines like "If I were a woman" express a

longing to *be* what one plays, a transgender identification coloured by an awareness that playing the woman's part was inevitably limited by time? Michael Hoffman's 1999 film of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* gives a cameo picture of how the boy actor may have mourned for the loss of the woman's part in Sam Rockwell's strikingly original interpretation of Thisbe's lament for the death of Pyramus.

"Those lily lips  
This cherry nose  
These yellowslip cheeks  
Are gone, are gone."  
MND 5.1.330-3

Figure 3: Sam Rockwell as Flute, as Thisbe in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, dir. Michael Hoffman (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 1999), 1.47-21



- 17 Gina Bloom has argued that "Flute's absurdly vocalized eulogy" and his failure to represent femininity is staged comically in Hoffman's film; that Flute's removal of his wig and emerging male voice is a troubled attempt "to restore dignity to heterosexual love."<sup>37</sup> Flute's lines *are* absurdly comic in the context of "Pyramus and Thisbe" but they also articulate something much more poignant when read with attention to the original actor and to Flute as an actor who dramatizes the experience of those with male anatomy who identified as women. The "lily lips", "cherry nose" and "yellow cowslip cheeks" are a parodic blazon that advertises the materials used to make up the boy actor as a woman. Flute, as Thisbe, refers to "my cherry lips" earlier in the action. The blazon is odd, and oddly applied to the dead hero Pyramus, though not if we read the lines from the perspective of the performers. The boy actor playing Flute as Thisbe speaks to an adult actor (playing Bottom, playing Pyramus) who can no longer play the role of Thisbe, in a "monstrous little voice" (1.2.44).<sup>38</sup> Voice seems to be the crucial factor; Rockwell's moving performance stages the breaking of the voice. When the actor playing Flute, playing Thisbe, looks at Bottom playing "young Pyramus", his eulogy for the lips, nose and cheeks which "Are gone, are gone," bewails the imminent loss of his own professional role as a woman, as well as its death in Bottom who "must play Pyramus" (a man). It is a triple farewell: to Pyramus; to the women's parts played by Bottom; and to those Flute knows he and the other boys on stage must leave behind. Rockwell's performance reanimates the original theatrical context where Flute as Thisbe appeals to the boys playing Helena, Hermia and Hippolyta, the "sisters three", to lament. The full resonance of "very tragical Mirth" in the tale of "young Pyramus and his love Thisbe" (5.1.54-5) comes sharply into focus.
- 18 David Kathman points out that Alexander Cooke, George Birch, Nicholas Tooley, John Wilson (a boy actor and musician), Richard Sharpe and William Trigge, all went on to play adult male roles. The pattern continued with Alexander Gough and John Honeyman who played women's roles as boys and transitioned from female to male



roles. I now draw on this empirical research and turn back to the playscripts to argue that the coming of age experienced by boy actors exists as a subtext of Shakespeare's scripts that would have been palpably obvious in early modern performances. The scripts are wittily original in the ways they deploy a series of theatrical in-jokes about the original practices governing apprenticeship in ways that simultaneously offer models of transgender experience as a difficult transitional process. I consider the point at which young actors crossed the threshold to "freedom" of a trade or to adult male roles; the process of passing on the woman's part; and the rehearsal process.

- 19 *Twelfth Night* dramatizes most keenly the tragi-comic experience of the boy actor poised on the cusp of manhood. Its saturnalian pattern – holding chronological progress and suspended, carnival time in balance – is ideally suited to accommodating this metatheatrical narrative. Here the mature boy actor who embodies the transvestite figure of Viola as Cesario occupies a liminal space. We hear from Malvolio that Cesario is "Not yet old enough for a man, nor young enough for a boy"; he is "standing water between boy and man" (1.5.139-42). The tidal metaphor is telling. *Twelfth Night* highlights a tragic irony of "original practice": the fact that just as the mature boy or "youth" has reached the height of his skill in playing the woman's part, his physical ability to do so is slipping away. The paradox is elaborated lyrically in "O Mistress Mine", attributed to Feste in the printed text, but possibly written for the actor who played Viola. It promises a lover who "can sing both high and low" and concludes with a *carpe diem* motif: "In delay there lies no plenty / Then come and kiss me sweet and twenty / Youth's a stuff will not endure" (2.3.43-8). In the light of David Kathman's argument that twenty one was the top age for youths to play women's parts, Feste's appeal to a master-mistress to "come and kiss me sweet and twenty" is resonant. Like much of the play's saturnalia, the lyric suspends time in order to focus, paradoxically, on transience. If the song was originally written for a boy actor playing Cesario who promises to speak to Orsino "in many kinds of music" (1.2.55) but whose voice can no longer sing the notes, then its recognition that "Youth's a stuff will not endure" would be all the more poignant.<sup>39</sup> The actor Thomas Belte, apprenticed to Heminges in 1594, who was the son of a musician and "may well have had the sort of early musical training that would have equipped him for an acting career," would have been 20 in 1600 and 21 in 1601, so the song may allude to (or originally have been sung by) him.<sup>40</sup> The "youth" of the song knows that his radiance will not last. When Orsino tells the enigmatic Cesario that women, like flowers, collapse at their height of their beauty, the boy playing Viola / Cesario responds with the lines "And so they are. Alas that they are so / To die even when they to perfection grow" (2.4.37-40).
- 20 The speaker of Sonnet 15 likewise marvels that "every thing that grows" on the "huge stage" is transient and "Holds in perfection but a little moment". *Antony and Cleopatra* stages the momentary brilliance of the mature boy actor using the same mythic imagery but, unlike the sonnet, gives a voice to the youth's rage against the dying of the light. Isis calmly tells Cleopatra "Finish good lady. The bright day is done, / And we are for the dark" (5.2.89-90) but the queen is furious at the thought of surrendering her crown and majesty to a less experienced actor: "some squeaking Cleopatra" who will "boy my greatness" (5.2.216-17).
- 21 "Youth" is a distinctive term to describe the liminal position occupied by the mature boy actor. Ellis Worth's testimony in a legal case involving sharers in the Fortune theatre makes a clear distinction between "boys" and "youths" as two types of contract

for boy players. He refers to "the custom for the Masters and Chiefe Actors of the ffortune Playhouse aforesaid & other Playhouses in and aboute London, to take youthes & boyes to bee their Apprentices or Covenant servants to serve & Abide with them for Certaine number of yeares."<sup>41</sup> Worth's phrasing associates the "youths" with apprenticeships and "boyes" with indentured service, implicitly crediting the apprenticed "youths" with greater maturity and higher status. Shakespeare's playscripts also use the terms distinctively.

- 22 Cesario is referred to as both "youth" (24 times) and "boy" (12 times) in *Twelfth Night*, with the latter term used exclusively by older male characters. "Boy" is a typical term of address for a servant (King Lear refers to his fool as "boy" for example), or to belittle someone. Sir Toby Belch refers to Cesario as a "paltry boy" (3.4.385) as a mark of disdain (as Antony does to infuriate Octavius Caesar 4.1.1 and Aufidius, Coriolanus, *Cor.* 5.6.103). In *Romeo and Juliet*, Capulet pulls rank over Tybalt by reminding him "what, goodman boy? ... Am I the master here or you?" (1.4.188-90), a comment that carries extra weight in the company context where the young actor playing Tybalt was (or had been) literally in service to his master the older actor. Successful completion of the journey from boy to youth and graduation from apprenticeship to be a freeman, of the guild or outside it, and to marry is signalled by Olivia's words to Cesario: "Be not afraid, good youth, I will not have you, / And yet when wit and youth is come to harvest, / Your wife is like to reap a proper man" (3.1.131-3). We have several cases of apprentices in the theatre completing their terms with marriage.<sup>42</sup> As Jones and Stallybrass point out, however, the youth who plays Viola exits in male clothes after the betrothals at the end of *Twelfth Night*, absorbed into the adult male figure of Sebastian who has been the model for the younger actor's graduation from apprenticeship. Sebastian may even have been played by the actor who preceded the current youth in the role of Viola.<sup>43</sup> In a run of the show, of course, the actor must replay that graduation process as Cesario until he passes on the role to his junior colleague in a revival. Cesario's identity as a eunuch alludes obliquely to the frustration of the boy actor being confined in a seemingly endless period of service.
- 23 A distinctive type of acting, involving range and variety, differentiates the "youth" from more junior "boys". In the light of Patrick Wallis's observation that most apprentices' training was "through observation, imitation and practice" that occurred "while they were engaged in useful work",<sup>44</sup> it seems reasonable to suppose that the junior boys in the company who played roles like Charmian or Iras, shadowed the most experienced boy actors who played Cleopatra or Lady Macbeth, actors who were, as noted, nearing their maturity and close to becoming "masters" themselves. To supplement Scott McMillin's account of how apprentice boy actors were paired with their masters to be trained,<sup>45</sup> we need to consider how boy players might have learned from each other as well. Boys who had only tiny roles, such as Imogen's lady-in-waiting Helen, Katherine of Aragon's Patience, Silvia's Ursula and Lady Macbeth's waiting-gentlewoman, watched performances by the senior boy actors who played their mistresses. They were literally gentlewomen in waiting; learning how to play gentlewomen by attending on and to them, by watching at close quarters. The plot for a lost 1599 production of *Troilus and Cressida*, directs Cressida to enter with "a waighting maid with a light", played by "mr Jones his boy".<sup>46</sup> Jack Hawkins, former member of Edward's Boys recalls how older boys with experience of playing female roles "passed it on to the younger lads," sometimes with regret at no longer being the centre point of the audience's gaze.<sup>47</sup> There must have been bitterness for boys whose contracts were

terminated or whose labour was sold to new masters or companies, having studied as ladies in waiting.

- 24 As children, junior boys are characterised by liminality, as Jennifer Higginbotham and Mark Albert Johnston argue in *Queering Childhood in Early Modern English Drama and Culture* (2018). The performance of junior female roles by boy actors explicitly advertises the innate queerness of children as protean subjects who bluff "sexes, genders, ages, races, statuses" and function as "mutually unmoored constructs" perhaps even, as Higginbotham and Johnston propose "discontinuous fetish objects, compelled to ground abstract concepts and ideals like sex and sexuality, gender and genre, class and status, age and temporality."<sup>48</sup> To early modern spectators, the description of Cesario's "smooth and rubious lip" or "maiden's organ" refer just as readily to the attractiveness of the boy actor as to the character's costume or her absent female body (1.5.31-2). Barrie's reminder that indentured or impressed boy actors, especially those who did not acquire acting skills, were often the objects of trafficking resonates here. Jonson's *Christmas His Masque*, features Venus boasting about trafficking her "play-boy" Cupid: "I could ha' had money enough for him, an I would ha been tempted, and ha let him out by the week to the king's players," naming Burbage and "old Master Hemminges."<sup>49</sup>
- 25 A different kind of nostalgic fetishism also emerges from the adult male speakers whose use of the term "boy" carried the weight of theatrical memory, looking back over a term of apprenticeship or service. A letter apparently from the apprentice John Pig to the wife of Philip Henslowe, his master, gives a glimpse of intimacy between masters and apprentices that was probably characteristic since they co-habited and worked together. Such intimacy informs Gonzalo's reference to the cross-dressed Nerissa in *Merchant of Venice*, for example. He calls the clerk "a youth, / A kind of boy, a little scrubbèd boy" (5.1.161). In *Twelfth Night* Antonio's very passionate relationship with Sebastian might also be read in terms of the master-apprentice bond. He recounts feelingly how he nurtured Sebastian "without retention or restraint" and is shocked at how, now, in the winking of an eye, the "ingrateful boy [...] grew a twenty years removed thing" and now refuses to acknowledge him (5.1.77-90). In theatrical terms Antonio's narrative charts the pain of the master's loss as the tide turns and youth gives way to manhood. If apprentices appealed to their masters for erotic as well as material reasons, as Stephen Orgel suggests,<sup>50</sup> then Antonio's sharp sense of loss may give voice to something felt by any adult member of the company whose boy actors inevitably, "grew a twenty years removed thing" by the end of their terms of service.
- 26 Although women and boys are cattle of one colour, as the actor playing Rosalind points out, it is the player's ability as a "moonish youth" that gives him the maturity and power to "grieve, be effeminate, changeable, longing and liking, proud, fantastical, apish, shallow, inconstant, full of tears, full of smiles" (3.2.410-15) in a complex, lengthy role like that of Rosalind or Cleopatra. Rosalind's role was surely written for one of the apprentices in the company who was outgrowing the woman's part. Thomas Belte would have been 19 and a half in 1599 (though only 4 years into his apprenticeship to Heminges); Alexander Cooke would have been 16. Though only bound to Heminges two years before from 26 January 1597, he had played what seem to be leading women's roles in 1597-8, married in 1603 and was playing male roles for the King's Men by 1604. Cooke and a third apprentice, Nicholas Tooley (who would have been 17 in 1599) both became sharers in the King's Men.<sup>51</sup>

- 27 Given the ages of these apprentices, it is perhaps not surprising that Shakespeare's texts register the experience of change from the mature boy actor's perspective. Although there may be no clock in the play forest of *As You Like It*, the text registers an inevitable chronological progression for the youth who played Rosalind: ripening from hour to hour and rotting whore-like as their womanly beauty fades. It is surely no accident that the number seven, marking the typical term of service for an apprentice, punctuates Touchstone's speech on the degrees of the lie as Ganymede exits to re-dress as Rosalind. In terms of the theatre company and the audiences who watched them regularly, the lengthy ending may have functioned as a drawn-out farewell to and for the boy actor who was mature enough to play the longest female role in Shakespeare. Celia says that Arden offers an escape "to liberty, and not to banishment" (1.3.138) and, as Ganymede, the leading boy has liberty to rehearse a male role as a "pretty youth" or "Fair youth" (*AYLI* 3.2.252 and 404), trying out the parts of lover, satiric fool, and older brother. When the player reluctantly surrenders the transgender Ganymede as Rosalind role because it cannot "serve your turn" for the concluding wedding (5.2.48), Touchstone's rhetorical flourishes of courtly wit (probably written to cover the change of costume), teasingly rehearse a process of passing from youth to man, exemplified in the "beard" which is the source of the famous quarrel. The structure of Touchstone's "purgation" speeches, where a list of seven courtly actions leads to the quarrel "upon the seventh cause", and the "lie seven times removed", which he must then repeat (5.4.44-103), deftly enacts a process of apparently endless deferral that surely plays on the apprentice's destined but not-yet-fulfilled release from service. The joke would have been particularly resonant for the youths Belte, Cooke and Tooley, only part way through their apprenticeships. For every repeat performance of *As You Like It* in the run, the leading boy ends having partially escaped, and delivers the epilogue in double speak, as a transvestite role and as male performer. The player pointedly defines the lady as "epilogue" and "the lord" "the prologue", looking forward to the swelling scene in which he can play inside or outside the theatre as his own master. The epilogue also serves to prolong the player's (perhaps reluctant) farewell to the female role and enjoyment of the transgender experience it offers. Because runs of *As You Like It* in the Chamberlain's company's repertory would have been short, the moment of transition would have been imminent for those in the theatre. In the farewell performance of Rosalind given by the original actor, well known for his skill in impersonating women, his last appeal "when I make curtesy, bid me farewell" must have been electrifying.
- 28 Other plays register the possibility that bidding farewell to the woman's part might have been tinged with tragedy for the boy actors who had devoted years to perfecting this style of acting. Sophie Tomlinson has perceptively shown how, in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, there is a moment of heightened emotion and artifice in which Julia, cross-dressed as the "gentle youth" Sebastian recounts how, as a page, he played Ariadne "in madam Julia's gown."<sup>52</sup> The actor's performance as Ariadne, the mythical figure who is abandoned on Crete by Theseus (whom she had helped), moves both female character and boy actor to weep "bitterly" at a shared sense of loss (4.4.160-72), as the mythical figure of Ariadne did when Theseus deserted her on Crete. Sophie Tomlinson has shown that the speech's highly flamboyant emotional mode of expression and its self-conscious artifice marks it off as a strangely baroque moment. At the level of character, Julia rehearses her pain at the loss of Proteus. As a piece of memorial professional self-reflection by the boy actor, the speech rehearses – in the sense of anticipates and artfully practises – the point when he (as a man) will abandon

Ariadne – the woman’s part – himself. He claims “I, in thought” felt “her very sorrow” (4.4.172). The effect may be similar to that in Flute's lament for “those lily lips” when playing Thisbe even though he “has a beard coming.”

29 Henry Jackson's famous comment on the tragic effect of Desdemona’s death in performance at Oxford reminds us how good boy actors were at impersonating women.<sup>53</sup> In addition to being “a star physical showcase,”<sup>54</sup> a leading female role, like any good acting, required and expressed the player’s emotional investment. The pattern of loss and renewal in passing on the female part is vocalised most fully by Cleopatra, a role which must surely have been performed by one of the most highly skilled and experienced boy actors in the King’s Men, possibly Heminges’ “boy” John Rice. Kathman notes that Rice appeared as a “fayre and bautifull” Queen of Cornwall opposite Burbage’s Amphion (Wales) in a 1610 entertainment to celebrate Henry’s Investiture as Prince of Wales.<sup>55</sup> Rice would have been about twenty years old.<sup>56</sup> Since the pageant *London’s Love to the Royal Prince Henry*, by Munday, was staged on barges on the Thames it is highly tempting to think that Rice’s performance as the Queen Cornelia either recalled or inspired the famous imagined scene of Cleopatra on her burnished throne which has come down to us in the printed text of *Antony and Cleopatra*. In the pageant, Rice had a substantial role to play and receives co-star billing with Burbage as, perhaps, he had as Cleopatra opposite Burbage’s Antony. The printed account describes them as “two absolute Actors, even the verie best our instant time can yield.”<sup>57</sup>

30 Although we have no record of Shakespeare’s play before the 1623 Folio, in original performances of Cleopatra the immortalising words “age cannot wither her nor custom stale / Her infinite variety” (2.2.234-5) would be literally true, since the role would have been embodied by the leading youth and passed on to the next boy performer. It seems ironic that, at the high tide of his career in playing a woman, the actor simultaneously acknowledges his journey’s end. Cleopatra determines to annihilate herself with the words:

My resolution’s placed. I have nothing  
Of woman in me. Now from head to foot  
I am marble constant. Now the fleeting moon  
No planet is of mine.  
5.2.254-7

31 Janet Adelman and later Dympna Callaghan have perceptively argued that this scene demonstrates an acknowledgement of gender difference and of the absence of woman on stage.<sup>58</sup> In terms of what is present (the mature boy actor), it can be read very differently, as a metatheatrical advertisement of the paradox that although this mature boy actor has reached a high tide of performance intellectually and emotionally, his ability to impersonate a woman physically has now reached its lowest ebb. Read in this way, Cleopatra’s suicide rehearses a gesture of farewell by the boy actor, a maturing process in which he transcends the roles he has been used to playing. John Rice (or whoever) presumably played the dying Cleopatra more than once and in each performance the *prospect* of one day having to grow out of female roles haunts the scene as a metaphor of death. Only in the youth’s final performance, the swan song in which he passed the role on to Charmian, does death take over as a metaphor for outgrowing the role. Since he now has “nothing of woman in me” he must move on. He must enter the undiscovered country of adult male roles. John Rice did this on 29 August 1611 by signing as a sharer in Lady Elizabeth’s Men, when he must have been

nearly twenty-one and legally acknowledged as an adult.<sup>59</sup> From the perspective of a twenty-year old youth who has perfected the art of playing great female roles and commands "show me, my women, like a queen" (5.2.227), the prospect of a younger colleague taking on the Cleopatra he has shaped must have been as frightening as her being displayed in triumph through the streets of Rome. Actor and character express a common disgust at being parodied, played badly "I'th posture of a whore" (5.2.219-21).

- 32 A more positive trajectory is offered in Cleopatra's final self-representation as the nursing mother whose baby sucks the nurse asleep (5.2.309-10). It pictures a process in which the leading boy actor, having mastered the role in his maturity and ready to teach apprentices himself, nurtures the younger one who will take his place. In this case, the boy performing Charmian (who has more lines than Iras) is the most likely candidate. Charmian is the queen attendant as well as the queen's attendant. She is destined, as the Soothsayer noted, to outlive her mistress. Cleopatra promises Charmian "when thou hast done this chore, I'll give thee leave / To play till doomsday" (5.2.226-8). Both actors know that playing till doomsday is impossible since, however immortal the role, their own embodiment of it is inevitably short lived. It will be passed on. When Cleopatra dies, Charmian celebrates his/her performance as "a lass unparalleled" and then completes her own role as attendant with the words "Your crown's awry / I'll mend it and then play" (5.2.318-19). The internal stage direction is for the actor to take the crown into his hands to "mend it" – set it right on Cleopatra's head. At that moment, however, the guard enters, and his line "Where's the Queen?" is highly pertinent, marking the moment where the role passes from the older boy to the younger who will go on to "play."
- 33 In conclusion, while any attempt to identify "original practices" from the fictional scripts is necessarily highly speculative, we should be attentive to the voices of the maturing actors who spoke the lines and embodied the roles of Cleopatra, Viola, Rosalind, Julia and Flute, and all those waiting gentlewomen. By attending to the transgender possibilities registered in the scripts we may hear, however faintly "A cry within of women" (*Mac SD8*) from "within" Shakespeare's all-male company.

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## NOTES

1. *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Suzanne Gossett, Jean E. Howard, Katherine Eisaman Maus, Gordon McMullan, London, W. W. Norton, 2016. All quotations from Shakespeare will be from this edition. Catherine Belsey, "Disrupting sexual difference: meaning and gender in the comedies" in *Alternative Shakespeares*, ed. John Drakakis, London, Methuen and Co. 1985, 166-190, p. 181.

2. See Alison Findlay, "Epilogues and last words in Shakespeare: Exploring patterns in a small corpus", *Language and Literature*, 29.3, 2020, 327-346, accessible online at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963947020949442>, last accessed 21 January 2023.

3. E. M. Parry, "No Clocks in the Forest: Queer Time in Arden," *Northern BroadSides and New Vic, As You Like It*, programme (2022).

4. Sawyer K. Kemp, "Transgender Shakespeare Performance: A Holistic Dramaturgy," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 19.4, 2019, 265-283.
5. Sawyer K. Kemp, "'In That Dimension Grossly Clad': Transgender Rhetoric, Representation and Shakespeare," *Shakespeare Studies* 47, 2019, 120-126, p. 121 (Kemp's italics) and p. 125, footnote 5.
6. I use the term "scripts" rather than "plays" to remind readers that the written words are a blueprint for and of performances.
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8. *Ibid.*
9. Dympna Callaghan, *Shakespeare Without Women*, New York, Routledge, 2000, p. 13.
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16. David Kathman, "Grocers, Goldsmiths and Drapers", *op. cit.*, p. 3.
17. Patrick Wallis, "Apprenticeship and Training in Early Modern England", *Journal of Economic History* 68, 2008, 832-61, p. 850, 847.
18. On learning of theatrical skills see Evelyn Tribble, *Early Modern Actors and Shakespeare's Theatre: Thinking with the Body*, London, Bloomsbury, 2017.
19. Wallis, *op. cit.*, p. 848.
20. David Mateer, "Edward Alleyn, Richard Perkins and the Rivalry Between the Swan and the Rose Playhouses," *op. cit.*, 61-77.
21. John H. Astington, *Actors and Acting in Shakespeare's Time*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 209.
22. Robert Barrie, "Elizabethan Play Boys in the Adult London Companies", *SEL* 48.2, 2008, 237-57, p. 241.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 243.
24. Philip Henslowe, *Henslowe's Diary*, ed. R.A. Foakes, second edition, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 118.
25. Kathman, "Grocers, Goldsmiths and Drapers," *op. cit.*, p. 4.
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29. Barrie, "Elizabethan Boy Actors in the Adult London Companies", *op. cit.*, p. 251.

30. Daniel Viktus, "“Meaner Ministers’: Mastery, Bondage and Theatrical Labor in *The Tempest*” in *A Companion to Shakespeare’s Works*, vol. 4, ed. Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard, Oxford, Blackwell, 2003, 408-26. A reading of both Caliban and Ariel in relation to service is given by Andrew Gurr, "Industrious Ariel and Idle Caliban" in *Travel & Drama in Shakespeare’s Time*, ed. Jean-Pierre Maquerlot and Michele Willems, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, 193-208.
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33. Jackson’s comments, in Latin, on a 1610 performance of *Othello* in Corpus Christi College were discovered by Geoffrey Tillotson, *Times Literary Supplement*, (20 July 1933). The translation quoted is taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, second edition, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, Ann Arbor, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997, p. 1978.
34. Michael Shapiro, "Lady Mary Wroth describes a ‘Boy Actress’", *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 4, 1989, 187-93, citing Lady Mary Wroth *The Countess of Montgomerie’s Urania* (London, 1621), p. 52.
35. Dutton, *op. cit.*, p. 188.
36. Barrie, "Elizabethan Boy Actors in the Adult London Companies", *op. cit.*, p. 252.
37. Gina Bloom, *Voice in Motion: Staging Gender, Shaping Sound in Early Modern England*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania University Press, 2007, p. 61.
38. Demetrius may be referring to their proximate ages when he says "A mote will turn the balance which Pyramus, which Thisbe is the better – he for a man, God warrant us; she for a woman, God bless us" (5.1.306-7).
39. See John Dover Wilson, ed. *Twelfth Night*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1949, p. 91-3; W. W. Greg, *The Shakespeare First Folio*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1955, p. 297. Des McAnuff’s 2011 *Twelfth Night* at Stratford Ontario brought out this interpretation effectively by opening Act 2 Scene 4 with Viola / Cesario singing the second verse of "O Mistress Mine" accompanied by Orsino's courtiers and repeating the last line "Youth’s a stuff will not endure" alone.
40. See Lawrence Manley, "Thomas Belte, Elizabethan Actor," *Notes and Queries* 54.3, 2007, 310-13, who confirms Thomas Belte was baptised in Norwich, 16 April 1579.
41. PRO C24/785/53 (in Part I) cited in Kathman, "Grocers, Goldsmiths and Drapers", *op. cit.*, p. 5.
42. Hugh Clarke seems to have been the exception in getting married just before he played Bess Bridges in Heywood’s *The Fair Maid of the West* in 1626. For examples of players culminating their apprenticeships with marriage see Kathman, "Grocers, Goldsmiths and Drapers", *op. cit.*, p. 8 and "John Rice and the Boys of the Jacobean King’s Men", *Shakespeare Survey* 68, 2015, 247-66, p. 251.
43. Feste’s remark to the twin Sebastian that those who pay him highly "get a good report after fourteen years’ service" (4.1.19-20) may be another oblique reference to a double term of apprenticeship.
44. Wallis, *op. cit.*, p. 850.
45. Scott McMillin, "The Sharer and His Boy: Rehearsing Shakespeare’s Women" in *From Script to Stage in Early Modern England*, ed. Peter Holland and Stephen Orgel, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, 231-45.
46. Kathman, "How Old Were Shakespeare’s Boy Actors", *op. cit.*, p. 228.



47. Jack Hawkins personal communication, Congrès de la Société Française Shakespeare, Paris, 18 March, 2022.
48. Jennifer Higginbotham and Mark Albert Johnston, eds. *Queering Childhood in Early Modern English Drama and Culture*, Cham, Switzerland, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, Introduction, p. 6.
49. David Kathman, "Grocers, Goldsmiths and Drapers," *op. cit.*, p. 32, citing Ben Jonson, *Christmas His Masque* (1616).
50. Stephen Orgel, "The Further Adventures of Ganymede" in *Childhood, Education and the Stage in Early Modern England*, ed. Richard Preiss and Deanna Williams, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, 143-161, p. 158-9).
51. See Manley, "Thomas Belte, Elizabethan Actor", *op. cit.*; Kathman says that Belte was bound on 12 November, 1595 ("How old were Shakespeare's Boy Actors?", *op. cit.*, p. 230) and gives biographical information on Cooke and Tooley. See also Mary Edmond, "Nicholas Tooley [Wilkinson] 1583-1623", ODNB. David Kathman, "John Rice and the Boys of the Jacobean King's Men", *op. cit.*, p. 247-66, notes Cooke's marriage and 1604 performance in Jonson's *Sejanus*.
52. Sophie Tomlinson, "The Actress and Baroque Aesthetic Effects in Renaissance Drama", *Shakespeare Bulletin* 33.1, Spring 2015, 67-82.
53. See further, Bart van Es, "Shakespeare versus Blackfriars: Satiric Comedy, Domestic Tragedy, and the Boy Actor in *Othello*" in Richard Preiss and Deanne Williams eds., *Childhood, Education and the Stage in Early Modern England*, Cambridge University Press, 2017, 100-20.
54. Harry McCarthy, "'Sport Indeede': Star Roles as Physical Showcase", chap. 4 of *Boy Actors in Early Modern England*, *op. cit.*.
55. David Kathman, "John Rice and the Boys of the Jacobean King's Men," *op. cit.*. Other possible candidates for the role, or indeed, the role of Charmian, are William Ecclestone and John Underwood, identified by Kathman as Rice's peers.
56. Kathman, "John Rice and the Boys of the Jacobean King's Men", *op. cit.*, p. 249, Kathman suggests the actor is the John Rice was christened in St Bride's Fleet Street on 22 September 1591 in "How Old Were Shakespeare's Boy Actors?", *op. cit.*, p. 232.
57. Anthony Munday, *London's Love, to the Royal Prince Henrie, Meeting him on the River of Thames on his return from Richmonde*, London, Edward Alde for Nathaniel Fosbrooke, 1610. I am indebted to David M. Bergeron's paper "Entertainments for Prince Henry's Investiture 1610" given at the theatre history seminar at the SAA in 2008 for details of the published account of Munday's entertainment. In it, Cornelia appears on a "great whale" which appears to have been mounted on one of the barges.
58. Janet Adelman, "Making Defect Perfection: Shakespeare and the One-Sex Model" in *Enacting Gender on the English Renaissance Stage*, ed. Viviana Comensoli and Anne Russell, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1999, 23-52; Dymrna Callaghan, *Shakespeare Without Women*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
59. Kathman, "John Rice and the Boys of the Jacobean King's Men", *op. cit.*, p. 250.

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## ABSTRACTS

This essay argues that the current celebration of transgender performance, such as in Northern Broadside's *As You Like It* (2022), also resonates historically in the experiences of boy actors who played women's roles in Shakespeare's company. It outlines the different kinds of contracts and

apprenticeships that the boy players experienced. It then draws on this empirical research to argue that the coming of age experienced by boy actors exists as a subtext of Shakespeare's scripts that would have been palpably obvious in early modern performances. Focussing in particular on *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* it demonstrates how the scripts are wittily original in the ways they deploy a series of theatrical in-jokes about the practices governing apprenticeship: the point at which young actors crossed the threshold to "freedom" of a trade or to adult male roles; the process of passing on the woman's part; and the rehearsal process. It argues that the scripts register the deeply moving experience of passing on the woman's part from the perspective of the boy actors who spoke the words "If I were a woman".

Cet article avance que l'actuel engouement pour les distributions transgenres, comme dans le *As You Like It* de la troupe Northern Broadsides (2022), s'inscrit dans le prolongement historique de l'expérience des jeunes acteurs qui tenaient les rôles féminins dans la troupe de Shakespeare. L'article rappelle les différents types de contrats et formes d'apprentissage qui liaient ces jeunes acteurs. Il s'appuie ensuite sur cette recherche empirique pour montrer que le passage à l'âge adulte de ces jeunes acteurs est le thème sous-jacent du texte shakespearien, ce qui aurait sauté aux yeux d'un public de l'époque. À partir de *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It* et *Antony and Cleopatra*, l'article souligne l'humour et l'originalité de ces textes qui déploient une suite de clins d'œil et d'allusions aux pratiques accompagnant l'évolution des apprentis au sein de la troupe : le moment où le jeune acteur franchit le seuil de la « liberté » en accédant à un métier ou aux rôles masculins, son abandon des rôles féminins et l'anticipation de cette transition. L'article affirme que les textes de ces pièces reflètent la forte charge émotionnelle du passage des rôles féminins aux rôles masculins pour le jeune homme qui prononce les mots : « si j'étais une femme ».

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** genre, performativité, transgenre, jeune acteur, perte, apprentissage

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## AUTHOR

ALISON FINDLAY

Lancaster University