

# The Theatre of Ambiguity

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## ABSTRACT

The increased diversity of beliefs surrounding the definition of gender identity and gender roles has enhanced the need for research on historical societies' beliefs and practices. By examining the private and professional theatre of Elizabethan England through contemporary scholarship, primary sources, and plays of the time, I found a contrast between companies comprised entirely of boys and those comprised of adult men. Boy players were able to play female and male characters across a wide age range. My analysis shows that the Elizabethan society's acceptance of this theatrical convention depended upon the widespread view of adolescents as ambiguous in age and gender identity. Playwrights, including Shakespeare, exploited this ambiguity of boys who were no longer children and not yet adults by using conventions such as double cross dressing and gender switching onstage to appeal to both male and female members of the audience. Although Puritan critics of the time like John Rainold claimed such conventions were detrimental to audiences, the backlash failed to stop or hamper the boy companies from producing art that took advantage of a culturally ambiguous understanding of gender identity.

## INTRODUCTION

As is widely known, male actors, most of whom were adults, exclusively composed the professional theatre companies of Elizabethan England. What is less widely known to the general public, several private theatre companies composed entirely of boy actors also enjoyed widespread popularity during the era. In this study, I argue that the productions of these boy companies critiqued the social order, reflected Elizabethan attitudes toward gender roles and offered a more complex form entertainment to audiences than "adult" companies. While the success of the companies was due to many factors, my research suggests that the ambiguity of the players played an important role to their overall cultural appeal of the boy theatre company phenomenon.

## POLITICAL BACKDROP

James I, who called himself the "natural father" of his people, addressed the Parliament in 1610 saying, "I will not willingly press you." Theatre historian Blaine Greteman writes in explanation, "James draws here on the familiar model of mimetic childhood education to argue that the role of Parliamentarians was not to speak their own desires but to learn to reflect and internalize his own—an attitude that shows why careful historians generally speak of 'assent' rather than 'consent.'"

In other words, the relationship between Parliament and the King mimicked the dynamic between a father and his children. In a similar fashion, the boys companies held a mirror to the political landscape of their time. The boys themselves were symbolic of the parliamentarians in that they had no voice of their own, since their own voice was silenced as they stepped into the lives of characters. The productions of boy companies tested boundaries of consent in a world where silent assent was the norm. By "opening up a safely ironic and ultimately innocent field through which to view it," the companies of boys had the opportunity to explore and critique the world.

## SHAKESPEARE

Shakespeare used the ability of boy players to shift from boy to woman to entertain his audiences. For example, he penned this epilogue speech for a young man playing a woman in *As You Like It*: "If I were a Woman, I would kisse as many of you as had beards that pleas'd me, complexions that lik'd me, and breaths that Idefi'de 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 curt'sie, bid me farewell [sic]." Such lines were aimed at reminding the audience that it was a boy's body underneath the dress and a male clothed in seductive femininity.

## AGE AND GENDER ROLE

The notion of the "teenage years" did not exist in the 17th century. There was childhood, an ambiguous in-between, and adulthood. Boy-players' ages ranged from about 10 through 22 and many leading parts were played by boys in their upper teens and even twenties. By continuing to act in a children's company into their late teens and early twenties, these young men expanded the ambiguous gap between childhood and adulthood.

As such, the audiences were able to live vicariously as their younger selves through the boy actors. Writing as an 18-year-old boy actor, John Honeyman reflects, "And nobody in the audience looks at anybody else. Because you live in a sort of stolen time they can't get to. Except through you."

Explaining the blurred attitudes toward binary gender roles prevalent during the Elizabethan period, Roberta Barker writes, "Caught between boyhood and manhood, the boy is also caught between masculinity and femininity; the very voice that suits him for a lady on the stage threatens to dismantle his claim to man's estate." Because of these age and gender ambiguities, the boys were thought of as innocent vessels through which to deliver bawdy and erotic material. As such, scripts were written in such a way to potentially titillate audience members, male and female. According to Greteman, playwrights used "the boy actor's body as a site for erotic desire and transvestized transgression, a stage for the performance of gender as it crosses borders between male and female." Double cross-dressing, references to the actor's actual gender, and sexual innuendos filled the boy companies' material, all exploiting the actors' ambiguity as young boys. Mary Bly writes, "The clear inference is that the depiction and celebration of male homoerotic pleasure was commercially viable in this period, particularly to audiences of boy companies."

## CONCLUSION

Productions of boys' companies critiqued society by challenging the status quo of a silent, assenting public. In doing so, the boys companies reflected on the importance and polarity of gender roles in Elizabethan England. Indeed, at least part of the popularity of these companies can be explained by the uncomfortable reality that Elizabethan audiences found boys playing adults erotically appealing. Because the actors were not yet adults, it was socially acceptable for them to produce bawdy materials and political satire because and political satire because they were seen as innocents still ensnared by childhood.

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