

# **The Edge of Adulthood: Shakespeare and the Enskillment of Child Actors in Elizabethan England**

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The role of child actors—and more specifically, boy actors—on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage has been fairly well studied, thanks in part to the work of Edel Lamb, Lucy Munro, and Carol Rutter among others.<sup>1</sup> The same, however, cannot be said for the young boys who were central to the various entertainments performed for Queen Elizabeth I of England whenever she visited a town or city on progress. Limited scholarly attention has been afforded to these boys—many of whom we know little about, but who managed to speak to their Queen on behalf of their entire city. In my work on the boy actors in civic entertainments, I have been struck by the remarkable similarities between the roles played by children in both dramatic and civic performances, and the ways that their roles were incorporated into the performance. To demonstrate these similarities across a variety of performances and years, I will focus on the entertainment performed for Elizabeth in Norwich in 1578, *Edward II* by Christopher Marlowe, and on *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet* by Shakespeare. With this paper, I lay the groundwork for future research into boy actors by arguing that the two genres are not divided by the sharp edge that they are routinely seen as having; but rather, that their blurred edges allow us to see the way that they complimented and reinforced each other.

For my purposes here today, I am interested in the mechanical and technical ways that boy actor roles were written into early modern performances. This presentation thus builds on, and re-purposes, the ecologies of skill framework developed by Evelyn Tribble. Civic entertainments and dramatic productions form part of what Tribble has observed as the “highly skilled work environment that was the Elizabethan theatrical system.”<sup>2</sup> Child actors, however, are not automatically skilled at the performances they are expected to act in. Tribble notes that “Adults help children attain the next stage [of theatrical skill] by providing material, linguistic, and/or environmental support – scaffolding – to aid them in practicing the appropriate skills.” Tribble argues, “A ‘scaffolded scene’ will provide a structure that constrains and thus prompts the novice actor’s activity.” Scaffolding is a type of attention device – particularly “the often-used ploy of addressing the character by name to alert the actor to his upcoming cues.” Tribble also introduces the concept of shepherding, where a cue or stage action is built into the content of the dramatic performance. The purpose of this paper, thus, is to trace the appearance of these enskillment techniques

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<sup>1</sup> See Edel Lamb, *Performing Childhood in the Early Modern Theatre: The Children's Playing Companies, 1599-1613* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Lucy Munro, “The Humour of Children: Performance, Gender, and the Early Modern Children’s Companies,” *Literature Compass* 2 (2005): 1-26; Lucy Munro, *The Children of the Queen’s Revels: A Jacobean Theatre Repertory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Carol Chillington Rutter, *Shakespeare and Child’s Play: Performing Lost Boys on Stage and Screen* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Evelyn Tribble, “Marlowe’s Boy Actors,” *Shakespeare Bulletin* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 5.

through the various productions I have identified, and to argue that both civic and dramatic performances used these techniques to train the young actors.

In the summer of 1578, the Queen spent several months on progress in East Anglia. She travelled through various towns in Norfolk and Suffolk between July 31 and August 30. She arrived at Norwich in the afternoon of Saturday, the 16<sup>th</sup> of August. The first pageant performed for the Queen's visit was designed by Bernard Garter. A fifteen by eight foot stage had been constructed for the pageant, and attached to the top of the stage was a sign that detailed the causes of the commonwealth: "The causes of this common wealth are, God truly preached. Justice duely executed. The people obedient. Idlenesse expelled. Labour cherished. Universall concorde preserved."

The pageant employed seventeen child actors, though only one had a speaking role. What is unique about the children is that sixteen of them are girls—described by Garter as "small women children." This explicit description of the children as "small women children" is not found in any other surviving account of an Elizabethan civic entertainment, nor is any other account so clear in gendering the child actors. On the stage also were six men, each portraying a cause of the commonwealth identified by the pageant's sign. Garter then states, "in the myddest of the sayde stage stood a prettie Boy richly apparelled, which represented the Common welth of the Citie." All of these actors—the one boy, the sixteen girls, and the six men—were in position on the stage, awaiting the arrival of the Queen. According to Garter, when the Queen "did come, the childe which represented [the] Commonwelth, did speak to hir highnesse these words":

Most gracious prince, undoubted soveraigne Queen,  
Our only joy next God, and chiefe defence:  
In this small shewe, our whole estate is seene.  
The welth we have, we finde procede from thence,  
The idle hand hath here no place to feede,  
The painefull wight hath still to serve his neede.

Againe, our seate denyes our traffique heere,  
The Sea too neare decydes us from the rest,  
So weake we were within this dozen yeare,  
As care did quench the courage of the best:  
But good advise, hath taught these little handes  
To rende in twayne the force of pining bandes.

1. Pointing to the spinners
2. Pointing to the Loombes
3. Pointing to the workes

From Combed wool we drawe this slender threede,  
From thence the Loombes have dealing with the same,  
And thence againe in order do procede,  
These several workes, which skilful art doth frame:  
And all to drive Dame neede into hir caue,  
Our heades and hands together labourde have.

We bought before the things that now we sel,  
These slender ympes, their workes do passe the waves,  
Gods peace and thine we holde and prosper well,  
Of every mouth the hand the charges saves.

Thus through thy helpe and ayde of power devine,  
Doth NORWICH live, whose harts and goods are thine.<sup>3</sup>

Once the boy's speech was ended, Garter recounts that "this shewe please hir Majestie so greatlye," and she only left for the marketplace "after great thanks by hir [was] given to the people." This account of the children's role in the first pageant provides a fascinating insight into the perceived skills of child actors. All of the actors—both adult and child—were positioned on the stage "in readiness" for the Queen, which meant that the children did not have to enter and exit the stage—they were already shepherded into place. Garter's inclusion of the stage directions—the "pointing" the boy did to emphasise what he was saying—brings another dimension to the boy's skilled performance. The boy was not simply a static performer, who delivered verses he had memorised. Instead, he actively engaged with his speech, and highlighted the connection of his words to the activity occurring on the stage at the same time: performing in the pageant rather than simply explaining its meaning. This interaction, however, is scaffolded: he points to the groups of people when he refers to them in his speech. Their presence was a scaffolded reminder for him to point, and mentioning them by name in his speech would also have served as a mnemonic prompt.

To move into the way that most of these methods of enskillment were transferred to theatrical productions, I'm going to look at the role of Prince Edward in Marlowe's *Edward II*.<sup>4</sup> Prince Edward first appears in Scene 11, and his entry onto the stage is shepherded by his mother and a visiting French nobleman. The King and Queen converse over the loss of Normandy, and the King decides his wife and his son will go meet with the French King. Edward then scaffolds the Prince's cue to speak by saying:

**We will employ you and your little son,  
You shall go parley with the King of France,  
Boy, see you bear you bravely to the king,  
And do your message with a majesty.**

The last two lines are directed at the boy playing the Prince, so he is both cued through the content of the lines—the reference to 'boy' in particular—and the way that he was spoken to, and invited to reply. The Prince's only lines in this scene reply to his father's directive:

**Commit not to my youth things of more weight  
Than fits a prince so young as I to bear...**

The Prince is then shepherded off the stage by exiting with his mother, whose line—**My lords, I take my leave, To make my preparation for France**—was also a verbal cue of her impending departure.

The Prince and his mother reappear in scene 13, where again the boy's entry onto the stage is shepherded by his mother. She speaks first, scaffolding his response:

**Ah, boy! our friends do fail us all in France.  
The lords are cruel, and the king unkind;**

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<sup>3</sup> Bernard Garter, *The Joyfull Receyving of the Queenes most excellent Majestie into hir Highnesse Citie of Norwich*, sig. C1r.

<sup>4</sup> Quotes from Oxford Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe, edited by Richard Rowland (1994).

### **What shall we do?**

The prince answers his mother's question, with a response far beyond his years:

**Madam, return to England,  
And please my father well, and then a fig  
For all my uncle's friendship here in France.**

Despite only speaking three more times in this scene, the Prince remains on stage for the entire scene, and exits with the rest of the adults.

The Prince's final two lines before his coronation are delivered in scene 19. He is shepherded onto the stage by entering with his uncle, the Earl of Kent. Once on the stage, the three adults—the Queen, Mortimer, and Kent—converse. Finally, Isabella turns to her son, and cues his response by saying:

**Come, son, and go with this gentle lord and me.**

The boy, scaffolded by his mother's line, replies:

**With you I will, but not with Mortimer.**

Mortimer responds, and his lines cue the boy to the action the line requires:

**Why, youngling, so dain'st thou so of Mortimer?**

**Then I will carry thee by force away.**

The Prince, in the arms of the Young Mortimer, calls out to his uncle, the Earl of Kent:

**Help, uncle Kent! Mortimer will wrong me.**

The boy is then shepherded off the stage with Mortimer and his mother when the scene ends.

As these examples demonstrate, the young boy playing Prince Edward was shepherded onto the stage for all his appearances, and the dialogue of the adults who preceded him scaffolded his lines. And like the Norwich entertainment, the boy addressed and referred to people also visible on stage. Marlowe thus shaped the young boy's performance to allow him to gain practice and experience on the stage, and also to provide flexibility over the age of the boy playing the prince.

Having established the methods of enskillment in both civic productions and in Marlowe's plays, I will now turn to Shakespeare. The first play I am going to look at is *Macbeth*—purely for that fact that it's my favourite play.<sup>5</sup> In this short presentation, it is not possible for me to go through all the examples of shepherding and scaffolding that appear across the more than fifty parts for children across Shakespeare's plays. However, both *Macbeth*, and *Romeo and Juliet*—which I will discuss in a moment—present some excellent examples of the way children were guided through their parts.

For *Macbeth*, there are two roles I will focus on: Fleance, and Macduff's son. Fleance appears in the play for the first time in Act 2, scene 1, with his father, Banquo. The cue for the scene is:

**Enter BANQUO, and FLEANCE bearing a torch before him**

The actor playing Banquo thus shepherds the boy playing Fleance onto the stage; and the cue may even indicate that Banquo led Fleance onto the stage. The dialogue between the

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<sup>5</sup> Quotes from *The New Cambridge Shakespeare*, edited by A. R. Braunmuller (1997).

man and the boy is also clearly scaffolded. Echoing the examples in *Edward II*, Banquo speaks first:

**How goes the night, boy?**

Fleance, his cue to speak reinforced by the 'boy' reference, replies:

**The moon is down; I have not heard the clock.**

After this brief and simple reply, Banquo says:

**And she goes down at twelve.**

Fleance then concludes the conversation by replying:

**I take't, 'tis later, sir.**

The line finishes with a reference to his father, the man he is speaking to, and is short and truncated. This is the last time Fleance speaks in the play—even though he will appear again in Act 3. His role in this scene, however, is not over. While waiting to speak to Macbeth, Banquo begins divesting himself of his armour, and handing it to Fleance. But he scaffolds the action for the boy, because the divesting forms part of his speech:

**Hold, take my sword. —There's husbandry in heaven;**

**Their candles are all out. —Take thee that too. —**

**A heavy summons lies like lead upon me...**

To ensure that the boy would remember that he had to actually hold his father's armour, he is explicitly told to hold them. The 'that' Banquo refers to was probably his belt or shield.

Then, as Macbeth and his servant enters, Banquo specifically cues the boy to pass him back his sword. Instead of relying on Macbeth's entry to cue the boy, Banquo scaffolds the boy by saying:

**Give me my sword.**

**Who's there?**

Macbeth and Banquo then converse briefly. Because Fleance was simply standing beside his father, holding the divested armour, it is unsurprising that Banquo's last line before his exit would have cued the boy that it was time to exit. Banquo finishes his conversation with Macbeth by saying:

**Thanks, sir; the like to you.**

Not only does the 'sir' reference invoke Fleance's earlier reply to his father, Banquo has also referred to Macbeth as 'sir' during his own speech. Father and son also exit the stage together—Banquo again shepherding the boy Fleance.

Fleance and Banquo appear again together in Act 3. Act 3, scene, 2 ends with Macbeth planning to have Banquo and his son Fleance murdered due to the prophecy. Act 3, scene 3, then opens with the three murderers planning on carrying out Macbeth's orders. Despite the role Fleance would play in this scene, he doesn't speak—but all his actions are scaffolded and shepherded for him. He enters the stage with his father—and is thus again shepherded onto the stage. Because Banquo is killed during the scene, he can't shepherd his son out. But his dying words scaffold Fleance's exit:

**O, treachery! Fly, good Fleance, fly, fly, fly!**

**Thou mayst revenge. O slave!**

**[Dies. FLEANCE escapes]**

Not only is Fleance referred to by name, he is also specifically told to flee, and would know to do so once Banquo stops speaking. This scaffolding allows there to be a struggle between Banquo and the First Murderer before Banquo is stabbed, meaning that the imprecise amount of time between the entry and exit would not affect the boy. Fleance does not appear again in the play, and he speaks a total of only 15 words across the two scenes he appears in. The role of Fleance was thus clearly designed as a preparatory role for new boy actors.

The varying levels of skill boy actors exhibited are visible in the role I now turn to. Plays, such as *Macbeth*, often include boys like Fleance, who functioned primarily as pages, but also boys like Macduff's son, who play a more focused role that can best be described, for lack of a better expression, as the cute doomed boy. Macduff's son speaks much more than Fleance, but is still scaffolded and shepherded for his part. He is shepherded onto the stage when he enters with his mother and Ross. He stands around while his mother and Ross converse, but his cue to speak is scaffolded into his mother's dialogue:

**Sirrah, your father's dead;**

**And what will you do now? How will you live?**

The son, cued by the 'your' and 'you' references, replies:

**As birds do, mother.**

The boy's short response even includes a reminder that he should direct his speech to his mother. Lady MacDuff then says:

**What, with worms and flies?**

To which the boy replies:

**With what I get, I mean; and so do they.**

This cued and short back and forth between mother and son continues until the messenger interrupts. Moments later, the murderer enters. Establishing that MacDuff is a 'traitor' during their conversation means that the murderer's line—**He's a traitor**—would have cued the boy to reply:

**Thou liest, thou shag-hair'd villain!**

The murderer then scaffolds the boy's impending death by replying:

**What, you egg!**

**Young fry of treachery!**

The boy is then stabbed, and his final lines are:

**He has kill'd me, mother:**

**Run away, I pray you!**

Not only does the dialogue mirror the events of the scene, but they also would have cued his actions, because the stage direction to die occurs after he finishes speaking.

The scene ends moments later with the direction:

**Exit LADY MACDUFF, crying 'Murder!' and pursued by the Murderers.**

The scene having ended, the boy was cued to leave.

What these two examples demonstrate is that boy roles were written to help enskill the young actors, and that even within the same play, there were different levels of skill interacting. The role of Fleance required far less skill than MacDuff's son—it is thus likely that a boy would have started out playing Fleance, then moving on to MacDuff's son, before

graduating to the adult parts. In a period where several plays were being performed by the same company in a week, with limited access to full scripts, it is not surprising that the child actors were given as much inbuilt help as possible to help them navigate their performances, and to get experience in remembering lines and adapting to improvised or imprecise fight scenes.

By means of a conclusion, I want to demonstrate the way that the enskillment of child actors spread to minor child roles. A clear example of this inbuilt cuing for minor roles is visible in the fight scene between Mercutio and Tybalt in Act 3 of *Romeo and Juliet*. After being stabbed, Mercutio cries out:

**Where is my page? Go, villain, fetch a surgeon.**

The first quarto doesn't even include an entry cue for the page, and the inclusion of the entry cue

**Enter Tybalt, and others**

in the second quarto still doesn't explicitly mention the page. However, Mercutio's line offers explicit structured assistance to the boy playing the page, reminding him when it is time for him to perform. The page is given a cued exit, and this was also foreshadowed in the instruction to 'Go.'

The appearance of the page, however, was most likely a reflection on the common appearance of pageboys with those of a higher social standing. So rather than specifically writing in the page's part, Shakespeare relied on both the social understanding of a page's role, and the way that the part could be scaffolded for the boy actor.

The small role of the page in *Romeo and Juliet* is actually what got me thinking about the way that civic productions and dramatic performances shared similar enskillment techniques. The first quarto version of *Romeo and Juliet* was published in 1597, between two and four years after it was first performed—giving an original performance date between 1593 and 1595. In September 1591, Elizabeth visited Elvetham Park, the home of the Earl of Hertford. The published account of the progress states that the Queen arrived at Elvetham "between five and sixe of the clock." As she approached the house, a "Poet saluted her with a Latine Oration in Heroicall verse." After a description of the poet, the account refers to the poet's 'boy.' The boy had not been mentioned in the account previously, and the account simply states:

**This Poets boy offered him a cushion at his first kneeling to her Majestie, but he refused it, saying as followeth ... Now let us use no Cushions, but faire hearts. For now we kneel to more then usual Saints.<sup>6</sup>**

After offering the cushion and being rebuffed, the poet's boy does not appear in the account again—he is neither given an exit (scaffolded or otherwise), nor is anything said of the cushion. Like Mercutio's page in *Romeo and Juliet*, the lack of a cued entry was most likely a reflection of the common appearance of pageboys with those of a higher social standing. The boy has no cue to indicate when it is time for him to offer the cushion, receives no specific direction for what to do after the cushion has been refused, nor what he should do

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<sup>6</sup> [John Wolfe], *The Honorable Entertainment Given to the Queenes Majestie In Progresse, at Elvetham In Hampshire, By The Right Honorable The Earle Of Hertford* (London, 1591), sig A4v.

while the poet embarks on his lengthy poetic monologue. Nevertheless, the poet explicitly refuses the cushion—rather than simply waving it away—and it is implied that the boy exited with the poet at the conclusion of the oration. While we must take the possibility of rigorous rehearsals into account for the limited inclusion of the boy's part, I argue that both the pages in the Elvetham entertainment and in *Romeo and Juliet* demonstrate the way that the shepherding and scaffolding of boy actors had become so pervasive by this time that it was not remarked on.

With this brief overview, I have demonstrated the way that boy actors were integrated into both civic and dramatic productions through highly scaffolded and shepherded roles: roles that would have exposed the boys to theatrical life, and served as a kind of on-the-job training regime. As the examples from *Macbeth* I have discussed show, varying levels of skill could even be catered for in the same play. Thinking about the crossovers between dramatic productions and civic entertainments in this way, I hope, will help us to stop seeing the sharp edge between the two genres, but instead focus on the blurred and shared edges the two contemporary and complimentary genres exhibit. Thank-you.