

Child Actors' Skill in Elizabethan Entertainments

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Queen Elizabeth I of England returned to London in late September 1578 after her progress through East Anglia. She remained in and around London during the remainder of the year, and into 1579.¹ During this time, Elizabeth and her councillors debated a marriage proposition that would prove to be the Queen's last. Of Elizabeth's marriage suits, none were as persistent and protracted as Francis, the Duke of Anjou (Alençon before 1576). Elizabeth first broached the potential marriage in mid-1578 as a way of aligning France and England against Spain over the conflicts in the Netherlands.² Both countries saw merit in the match, and much of the diplomatic communication between France and England in 1579 was devoted to advancing the proposal.³

In a final attempt to secure the necessary political arrangements, Elizabeth invited a French delegation to Whitehall in May 1581.⁴ In addition to the high-level diplomacy that was the purpose of the visit, the Queen and her French visitors were entertained by shows that included both child actors and important nobles. The entertainments were published just over a month after the French departed England, by Henry Goldwell, in a pamphlet called: *A briefe declaratio[n] of the shews, devices, speeches, and inventions, done & performed before the Queenes Majestie, & the French ambassadours*.

Despite collating the account, Goldwell is unlikely to have written or devised the entertainments himself. Scholars instead generally agree that they were more than likely written - either in part or all - by Sir Philip Sidney, with John Lyly or Henry Lee posited as possible contributors.⁵ Goldwell's account contains what is conceivably the most famous

¹ Mary Cole Hill, *The Portable Queen: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Ceremony* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 191, 206.

² Susan Doran, *Elizabeth I and Foreign Policy, 1558-1603* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 38.

³ Katherine Butler, *Music in Elizabethan Court Politics* (Woodbridge, UK and Rochester, NY: The Boydell Press, 2015), 124.

⁴ Hill, *The Portable Queen*, 192.

⁵ Butler, *Music in Elizabethan Court Politics*, 123; Susan Doran, "Juno versus Diana: The Treatment of Elizabeth I's Marriage in Plays and Entertainments, 1561-1581," *The Historical Journal* 38.2 (June 1995): 273; Susan Frye, *Elizabeth I: The Competition for Representation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 11; Elizabeth Goldring and David Parrott, editorial commentary of *The Four Foster Children of Desire*, by Henry Goldwell, in *John*

Elizabethan entertainment: *The Four Foster Children of Desire*, which was first performed on 15th May 1581.⁶

The Marriage Question: Public and Courtly Responses

Unsurprisingly, the ongoing vacillation of the Elizabeth-Anjou match did not escape public attention. The most famous public critique of the potential union was *The Discovery of a Gaping Gulf*, by John Stubbs. The pamphlet was a comprehensive argument against the proposed marriage of Elizabeth and Anjou, with particular emphasis placed on the abhorrent union of a Protestant and a Roman Catholic.⁷ Elizabeth was highly incensed by the pamphlet: it not only insulted her vanity, but it also questioned her Protestantism.⁸ Elizabeth ensured that the Queen's Bench found Stubbs and his publisher guilty of treason by conspiring to excite sedition, and they were sentenced to be imprisoned, and have their right hand cut off.⁹ The punishment was exacted, and both men remained in the Tower until 1581.

The objections Stubbs raised were neither imagined nor irrelevant. Nevertheless, the public expression of Elizabeth's vehement disapproval of Stubbs' pamphlet underscores the danger of engaging in political commentary. It is important to note that Goldwell's account of the French delegation's entertainment contains some overlapping arguments raised by Stubbs, but Goldwell suffered no political reprisals - even though his name was clearly attached to the work. Instead, Goldwell (and Sidney) were able to rely on a far more allegorical discussion of the union - something that Stubbs' rather blunt assessment of the potential match did not contain. The critique of the potential union, delivered in dramatic speeches by child actors, demonstrates the important role children played within a larger strategy of dramatic misdirection; a strategy that saw a carefully constructed political message inserted into a fictional framework that both offended nobody, and at the same time got its message across.

Nichols's The Progresses and Public Processions of Queen Elizabeth I, eds. Elizabeth Goldring, Faith Eales, Elizabeth Clarke, and Jayne Elisabeth Archer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 68; Martin Wiggins, with Catherine Richardson, *British Drama 1533-1642: A Catalogue, Volume II: 1567-1589* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 270.

⁶ Jean Wilson, *Entertainments for Elizabeth I* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1980), 61-62.

⁷ Annabel Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England* (Madison, WI and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 25.

⁸ Ilona Bell, "'Sovereign Lord of lordly Lady of this land': Elizabeth, Stubbs, and the *Gaping Gulf*," in *Dissing Elizabeth: Negative Representations of Gloriana*, ed. Julia M. Walker (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), 101.

⁹ Bell, "Elizabeth, Stubbs, and the *Gaping Gulf*," 112.

Child actors, therefore, were prized in Early Modern theatrical productions because they brought with them a completely different set of skills to adults. According to Michael Witmore, "children could lend an air of innocence to traffic in fictions, particularly when the whole process seemed exempt from adult interests and passions."¹⁰ Likewise, "children's symbolic appeal during this period, grew, in fact, out of a sense that they were agents without interests," and this "exemption meant that children could appear charming and unaffectedly elegant ... a quality that was played up in civic pageantry."¹¹ Thus, child actors were primarily employed in civic entertainments so that they could make a political point (albeit in a subtle way) without offending the Queen. Early Modern audiences perceived children as embodying "moral innocence, generosity, and cognitive simplicity," and entertainment devisers used this understood skill to ensure that for the brief window they had the Queen's attention, she would understand their particular grievance at that time.¹²

The boys in civic entertainments – protected by their innocence and their embodiment of the future – were thus not seen as political commentators, but rather, as mouthpieces for the Commonwealth. The skilled innocence of child actors in delivering political commentary in dramatic allegory therefore clearly protected both Sidney and Goldwell from the Queen's wrath.

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The Virgin Queen emerges

"I grieve and dare not show my discontent; I love, and yet am forced to seem to hate;" wrote Elizabeth in *On Monsieur's Departure*, after Anjou had taken his leave of Elizabeth and England in 1582.¹³ Despite favourable opinions of the union existing on both sides of the Channel, the divided opinion of the Queen's Privy Council regarding the long-term merit of the union resulted in Elizabeth forcing the French to end the negotiations. Ultimately, Sidney and the rest of the anti-Anjou faction triumphed. Nevertheless, *The Four Foster Children of Desire* proves how uncertain the outcome of the marriage negotiations were. In the content

¹⁰ Michael Witmore, *Pretty Creatures: Children and Fiction in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007) 7.

¹¹ Witmore, *Pretty Creatures*, 7.

¹² Witmore, *Pretty Creatures*, 29.

¹³ Elizabeth I, "On Monsieur's Departure, circa 1582," in *Collected Works*, 302, 302n1.

of the entertainment's various orations, Sidney walked the fine line between advising the Queen, and openly criticising her. One of the clearest tools he employed to prevent a repeat of Stubbs' incident were child actors. Child actors, who were both protected by their skilled innocence and embodiment of the future, allowed Sidney to communicate his concerns surrounding the marriage without causing offence to Elizabeth. In exploiting these abilities, Sidney was employing the longstanding tradition of advising Elizabeth through drama. The child actors in *The Four Foster Children of Desire* had key roles - they delivered the initial challenge, the welcome on the first day, and the closing orations on both the first and second day. Clearly, the use of a child in this instance was not a coincidence. The Duke of Anjou's marriage proposal would turn out to be Elizabeth's last. Elizabeth's transformation into the Virgin Queen known to history was thus all but complete: thanks in small part to the special skills of child actors who were able to warn the Queen how uncomfortable England was with the idea of their monarch once again marrying a foreigner.