



***When Clothes Made the Woman***  
The Elizabethan Boy Player  
by Jerry James

*The quick comedians / Extemporally will stage us... and I shall see  
Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness / I' th' posture of a whore.*

—William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*



*This portrait of an androgynous Elizabethan youth (c. 1590) is by Nicholas Hilliard*

Take a moment to consider the epigraph. As Shakespeare's Cleopatra, proud queen of Egypt, nears her death, she is chagrined to realize how badly she will be remembered, portrayed onstage by a *boy*. But to Shakespeare's audience, this may have been a laugh line—because the actor speaking it was one of those self-same boys Cleopatra was excoriating. On the Elizabethan stage, boys would be girls. And women, too. Shakespeare frequently took advantage of this by having his boy actor play a woman masquerading as a boy, as in *Twelfth Night*,

We know some of these boys' names and what became of them. But, as with most things from 400 years ago, what follows is based mainly on informed conjecture, much of it from *Squeaking Cleopatras* by Joy Leslie Gibson. Where did these boys come from? How did they live and work? And what were they doing playing women in the first place?

### **Why No Women?**

It is often said that women were forbidden by law to appear on the Elizabethan stage, but Oxford's Emma Smith flatly contradicts this. "We don't know exactly why women were not allowed to perform ... there is no formal prohibition, there is no legal problem. It seems to be one of those cultural norms that's so ingrained that nobody needs to tell anyone to do it, and nobody needs to challenge it."

Elizabethan medicine held that women were incomplete men, having failed to develop further due to lack of heat in the womb. The Church of England, established by Elizabeth's father,

Henry VIII, held the same views as the Church of Rome: It was all Eve's fault, and her sinful daughters were no better than she. Little wonder, says Smith, that, "One of the surprising but unavoidable things about the theatre of this period was that it did not seem to feel the lack of women on the stage."

In an unsanitary world with a high rate of child mortality, women were expected to turn out children as efficiently as possible, if they didn't die in childbirth themselves. The average life expectancy was 42 (or less; sources vary). Boys were kept in dresses until the age of 7, when, in a breeching ceremony, they were given their first breeches—britches, pants. Soon after, it was time for them to begin to make their way in the world. Childhood, as we think of it, was not an Elizabethan concept.

### Whence the Boys?

The Elizabethan middle class was controlled by the guild system, as it had been since medieval times. Guilds assured the customer that his butcher, baker or candlestick maker had become a master only after having spent years in his profession, first as an apprentice, then as a journeyman. Curiously, it was often the sons of this class that became boy players for one simple reason: They could read and write. (Actors had to be able to do both to copy their lines from the master script.)



*The Shoemakers Guild*

Boys would go to petty school at 4 and grammar school at 8. Because the theatres had no use for a boy until he was 10—it's conjectured that only then would his voice have developed sufficiently to be heard in open-air theatres—he would have had several years training in rhetoric, speaking aloud in Latin and Greek, as well as English.

But there was one hitch. A boy could not apprentice to the actors' guild, because no such guild existed. However, many of those in the theatre had been brought up in other guilds, whose trades they were not forced to practice. Ben Jonson, for example, was a bricklayer. On paper, a boy player might be an apprentice grocer.

And paper there was. Agreements were written down and signed, except in the case of the Children of St. Paul's and the Children of the Revels, who had royal permission to impress any boys they wanted into service, snatching them off the street.

Boys might be apprenticed for as many as 12 years or as few as 3. Sometimes the master paid the family, sometimes not. There was no Actors Equity Association to oversee the agreements. A boy might be let go if he couldn't sing or dance, couldn't memorize lines or if his voice broke. This last, a major plot point in *Shakespeare in Love*, is thought to have happened later than it does today. The Elizabethan diet contained less protein; boys' voices might not break until 18 or even older.

Boys were usually housed at the master's with his wife and children. Letters exist in which former apprentices send their love to their surrogate mothers. And there are wills in which the

master leaves his costumes to his boys, no small thing in an age when players were expected to provide their own.

The master's duty was to train his boys, who would also learn by observation. They were there at morning rehearsal, afternoon performance and post-show rehash in the taverns. If all went well, walk-on roles at 10 would lead to minor roles at 13 and leads at 17. But first, the boy player would have to learn how to be a woman.

### A Woman's Hide



*Isabella in "The Spanish Tragedy"*

Were there special masters who taught the boys the art of impersonating a woman? We don't know, but we do know what an actor playing a woman would have worn. This would differ with her class, because Sumptuary Laws forbid the lower classes to dress up like the nobility. Let's consider what a boy would have worn to play Isabella, a noblewoman, seen above in a contemporary illustration. (All the costumes would be made of the finest fabrics available, because Sumptuary Laws did not apply onstage.)

Dressing began with the shift, a knee or ankle-length linen smock. Then came long stockings, held up by garters, and shoes, which may not have had heels. A bum roll sitting high on the hips was followed by the farthingale, a 360° framework that held out the petticoats and skirts. (The bum roll elevated its rear.) Above the waist, a stiffened underbodice was covered by a jacket-like bodice. Atop this might be the partlet, a sleeveless garment worn over the neck and shoulders. Around the neck was a ruff or lace collar. The whole was capped with a wig. Woe to the boy player who suddenly had to nick off to the loo!

### The Company



*Mid-Performance at the Globe*

Before the boy player played leads like Isabella, he would spend years being tried out in smaller roles. His debut might be as Ursula in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, who has no lines. She enters

with Silvia, who later commands, “Ursula, bring my picture here.” She does so, and later exits with Silvia. A boy who bungled Ursula would not be marked for success.

But if the boy was good... Smith says, “It is clear that in the comic plays of the 1590s [Shakespeare] looks at the actors that he has at his disposal, and he has a couple of young men who can play young, slightly adolescent-y women, and he writes parts for them. This is why we get Viola and Olivia, and Rosalind and Celia.

“It is also clear that by about 1605, Shakespeare’s company has somehow acquired an actor who can carry extraordinarily mature female roles. And for that actor Shakespeare writes Lady Macbeth, Volumnia, the mother of Coriolanus, and Cleopatra.”

But once the boy player’s voice broke, even if he had created Cleopatra, there were no guarantees. Shakespeare’s company had only 9 or 12 sharers—those who shared the expenses and split the profits. Only death or retirement would open a slot for a new sharer, who would have to buy out the old. The other actors were boy apprentices and hired men, and a hired man lived from job to job. For actors, even 400 years later, some things never change.

### The End



*Billy Crudup as Edward Kynaston  
in “Stage Beauty”*

The Puritans had long railed against the theatre, and especially against boy players. (Some boys were doubtless sexually abused.) William Prynne wrote, “...how many ingenuous, witty, comely youths... are oft times... wholly consecrated to the Stage (the Devil’s Chapel...) where they are trained up in the School of Vice, the Play-house... to act those womanish, whorish parts which Pagans would even blush to personate.” Prynne later had his ears cut off, but that didn’t stop the Puritans. In 1642, the English Civil War closed the theatres. By the time Charles II was restored to the throne in 1660, not a boy player remained. For some time, the custom was restored, but Charles had seen women acting in France and was inclined to see it so in England. A dramatically satisfying (if historically wobbly) account of this time can be seen in the film, *Stage Beauty*. Its protagonist, Edward Kynaston, who later transitioned to male roles, was the last great boy player of the English stage.

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