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Jeanne H. McCarthy. *The Children's Troupes and the Transformation of English Theater 1509–1608: Pedagogue Playwrights, Playbooks, and Playboys*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2017. Pp xxiv, 251. Hardback £115.00. ISBN: 9781472487797.

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In 1584, when John Lyly's reputation as a writer was perhaps at its height, Barnabe Riche wrote that Lyly 'can Court it with the best, and Scholler it with the most, in whom I know not whether I should more commende his maners or his learnyng, the one is so exquisite, the other so generall'.[1] Riche's comments offer an appropriate frame for thinking not only about Lyly's dramatic work and the children's companies for which he wrote, but also the central arguments of Jeanne H. McCarthy's book, which similarly stresses the scholarly and courtly aspects of this part of the early modern theatrical landscape.

Scholars have long debated the relationship between companies composed entirely of boy actors, which emerged from the sixteenth-century grammar and choir schools, and those composed of men and boys, which operated under royal and noble patronage and performed on a more commercial basis. In recent decades, the idea that these were 'rival traditions', a term coined by Alfred Harbage, has been challenged.[2] Scholars such as Roslyn Lander Knutson have questioned the picture of 'cut-throat rivalry' presented by earlier accounts, instead stressing 'alternative strategies of competition such as imitation and cooperation'.[3] In contrast, McCarthy returns to a binary model, contrasting what she variously terms a 'primarily oral', 'popular', and 'artisanal' performance tradition in the adult companies with a 'hyper-literate subculture' in the children's companies and schools.

The Children's Troupes and the Transformation of English Theater seeks to reshape our understanding of the development of drama in England during the sixteenth century by challenging standard critical narratives about the training and education of actors, and its relationship with the composition, style, and structures of their plays. It explores these central topics from a number of angles: chapter one questions the centrality of text in the adult company tradition; chapter two argues that important early sixteenth-century plays such as *Mankind, Youth, Hick Scorner,* Henry Medwall's *Fulgens and Lucrece,* and John Skelton's *Magnificence* were performed by children; chapters three and four explore playing and actor training in 'oral' and 'book-centered' practices; chapter five looks at patronage contexts and the role of Elizabeth I in promoting 'the literary drama';

chapter six argues that there were distinctive differences between the ways in which playwrights worked for the adult and children's companies; chapter seven focuses on Ben Jonson's late-Elizabethan plays, *Cynthia's Revels* and *The Poetaster,* as responses to children's company traditions; and an epilogue examines the decline of the children's companies under James I. Alongside its central argument about playing, actor-training, and the text, the book also engages with broader debates within the field, challenging two ideas in particular: that textually orientated drama is dry or untheatrical; and that the market and commercial competition shaped the development of theatre.

The book makes a series of important interventions. McCarthy rejects a critical tradition that has treated the children's companies as a marginal, at times even freakish, part of the theatrical landscape, and that has assumed that the impact of their performances was based only on novelty or the satiric disparity between actor and role. Instead, she makes a case for the centrality of children's company practices in the development of drama in the late sixteenth century, arguing that they were increasingly adopted by the adults. She questions the evidence on which our understanding of apprenticeship in the adult companies has been based and explores the techniques through which boy actors in the children's companies may have 'studied' their texts, contrasting the 'artisanal player … functioning within a culture of mixed levels of textual literacy' with the '*fully* literate, text-centered performance practice' of 'the child player of schools and chapels' (22, original emphasis). Apprenticeship, in her view, involved 'training in symbolic acting or simple stereotypes' and 'some degree of directed imitation and repetition, rather than study', while the children's tradition instead 'required textual memorization and a skill of impersonation that did not rely on imitating professional adults a child or master had observed, but rather invention, imagination, and empathy' (115, 75, 115). She rightly stresses the demands that the plays of Lyly make on performers, and offers a series of insights into Elizabethan court culture and its relationship with the children's companies. Her discussion of the impact of the queen's patronage on the work of Lyly and George Peele is especially stimulating. Elizabeth, McCarthy argues, 'presided over a theater that seems consistently to have reminded the court of the difference in status of monarchs and subjects' (152). This argument then forms a backdrop for the analysis of *Cynthia's Revels* and *The Poetaster* as plays that both exploit and resist this dynamic: 'at the same time that it schools courtiers, [*Cynthia's Revels*] places the poet above them', while *Poetaster* 'goes even further to argue that the poet has no limits at all' (206–7).

Despite these strengths, the book is not without problems, especially in McCarthy's treatment of the adult companies and the later children's troupes.

Like many scholars, she explores the depiction of theatrical practice within plays and juxtaposes it with other forms of evidence. In her discussion of the play *Histriomastix,* for instance, she acknowledges that its satirical representation of a theatre company is 'no doubt grossly exaggerated' but nonetheless states that it 'demonstrates [that], even by 1610, not all artisanal players were necessarily attempting to perform fully scripted plays' (172–3, 174). There is therefore a double-standard at work when McCarthy characterizes David Bevington's scholarship on travelling troupes of the sixteenth century as being 'based on some colorful references in plays' or criticizes Tiffany Stern for citing the use of parts in the rehearsals for 'Pyramus and Thisbe' in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the practices of Edward Alleyn 'to confirm the prior existence of an essentially universally literate theater' (68, 176). In fact, McCarthy's treatment of Alleyn poses a number of problems. Because there is substantial evidence for Alleyn's literacy, such as his possession of playbooks and his annotations on his manuscript part of Orlando in Robert Greene's *Orlando Furioso,* McCarthy argues that he was 'exceptionally literate' for an adult player (87). She is right to argue that we should not assume that Alleyn's literacy was commonplace, but we equally cannot assume that he was unique; in order to make this argument, moreover, McCarthy also elides other evidence of adult players who were highly literate, most obviously the actor-playwrights who worked for Alleyn's company, such as William Bird, Charles Massey, and Samuel Rowley.

The book is also marred by a series of factual errors. Some are relatively trivial, such as the assertion that Jonson said that he had tutored Saloman Pavy when his 'scholar' was actually Nathan Field, or the claim that John Marston did not attend university (72, 187). Other errors have a broader impact on the shape of McCarthy's argument, such as the assertion that only one of John Heminges's apprentices, William Trigg, went on to an adult career (74). At least five of the ten boys that Heminges took as apprentices between 1595 and 1628 had a traceable career after the end of their apprenticeship: Trigg, Alexander Cooke, George Birch, Richard Sharpe, and Thomas Holcombe. We have evidence, in fact, of at least thirty actors with the adult companies who began their careers as apprentices, a substantial number given the general paucity of records relating to boy actors in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. We cannot, therefore, use the progression of boys to acting careers as a way of judging the success or otherwise of the apprenticeship method. The epilogue's discussion of the decline of the children's companies contains a number of errors. McCarthy's assertion that 'records of the Children of the Queen's Revels are scanty and unverifiable after 1610', for example, overlooks records of court performances in 1611–12 and 1612–13;

her characterization of the children's companies touring practices in the 1610s as 'novel' overlooks evidence of the Chapel company touring in the 1580s and 90s, assembled by the Records of Early English Drama; and her statement that James Burbage 'obtained the lease' of the Blackfriars playhouse does not sufficiently disentangle the earlier Blackfriars playhouse, converted from leased property by Richard Farrant in 1576, from the one that Burbage converted from property that he had bought in 1596 (222, 223, 227).

Despite the book's shortcomings, McCarthy's study remains an important intervention in the scholarship on early modern children's performance, offering a series of insights into sixteenth century theatrical practice, a number of new avenues for future scholarship, and an insight into the 'rich conjunction of oral and literate modes' on which theatre depended (83).

Notes

1 Barnabe Riche, *The Second Tome of the Travailes and Adventures of Don Simonides* (London, 1584), I3r.

2 Alfred Harbage, *Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions* (New York, 1952).

3 Roslyn Lander Knutson, *Playing Companies and Commerce in Shakespeare's Time* (Cambridge, 2002), 11–12, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511486043.