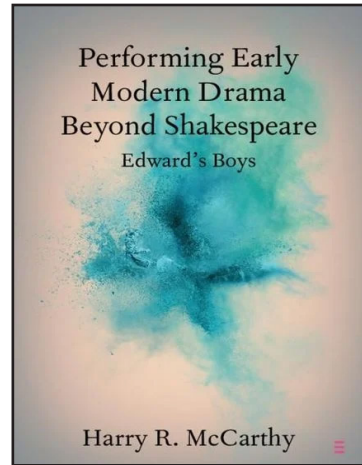


Harry R. McCarthy. *Performing Early Modern Drama Beyond Shakespeare: Edward's Boys*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp 100. Paperback \$22.00 USD. ISBN: 9781108810234. <https://doi.org/10.117/9781108893848>.

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Harry R. McCarthy sets out to achieve two interlocking goals in this lively and densely argued contribution to the 'Elements in Shakespeare Performance' series. One is to offer the 'first detailed study of Edward's Boys' (1), a company that has gathered an enthusiastic following amongst lovers of early modern drama in performance over the past fifteen years. The other is to consider 'what Edward's Boys has to tell us about what it means (and takes) to perform non-Shakespearean early modern drama today, as well as what such practices might mean for performing Shakespeare' (8). McCarthy accomplishes the first of these aims in more detail than the second within the tight confines of a brief Cambridge Element. His work succeeds, nevertheless, not only in offering an engaging portrait of a unique playing company but also in drawing insights from their practice that have valuable implications for the broader study of early modern drama in performance.

In the first pages of *Performing Early Modern Drama Beyond Shakespeare*, McCarthy offers an admirably succinct and lucid history of Edward's Boys, an 'amateur troupe composed entirely of pupils (aged 11–18)' from King Edward VI Grammar School (KES) in Stratford-upon-Avon (1). The company began to coalesce in 2003 when boys from KES were asked to perform scenes from early modern school drama for Michael Wood's BBC-TV series *In Search of Shakespeare*. Carol Chillington Rutter led a further group of workshops, this time concentrated on early modern boy actors and gender performance, with the school's pupils in 2005. From 2008 onwards, McCarthy notes, 'a series of opportunities to perform non-Shakespearean plays in collaboration with the University of Warwick (where Rutter is Professor of Shakespeare and Performance Studies) and the



Education department at Shakespeare's Globe quickly began to present themselves' (15). Led by KES's deputy headmaster, Perry Mills, Edward's Boys came to specialize in explorations of plays originally created for early modern English boys' companies. The company retained its practice of casting only male-identified actors even after KES began to accept female-identified students into the sixth form (8). A helpful list appended to McCarthy's study cites more than twenty productions they created between 2008 and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Among these are numerous performances of plays that have otherwise had few showings on the modern English stage, including works by John Lyly, John Marston, Thomas Middleton, and Ben Jonson. McCarthy notes that these 'productions constitute the largest corpus of early modern boy theatre in performance available for examination by twenty-first-century scholars' (2). This point alone would justify McCarthy's decision to challenge early modern performance studies' dominant focus upon professional theatre practitioners by dedicating a full study to this teenaged, amateur company.

Rather than simply describing Edward's Boys' productions of such underperformed plays as Lyly's *Woman in the Moon* or Middleton's *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, however, McCarthy trains his reader's attention upon the company's creative process. *What* they play is ultimately less central to this Cambridge Element than *how* they play with it and with one another. McCarthy argues that the company's development has been marked by a move away from its early focus on 'authentic' early modern performance practice (and especially on boys' portrayals of female-identified roles). Rather than pursuing the 'illusion' that a contemporary company can reconstruct the distant 'practices and dynamics of historical performances' (19), Edward's Boys have, McCarthy suggests, increasingly developed an ensemble-based approach grounded in their own time and space.

Having attended numerous company rehearsals and conducted extensive interviews with student members of the company and their adult mentors, McCarthy is able to offer valuable insights into the 'job o' work' (to use the company's own phrase) through which Edward's Boys bring a play to the stage (29). He begins by examining the painstaking text work that allows company members to take active 'ownership' of the play-texts they perform (31), showing how 'working through a photocopied text devoid of scholarly apparatus forces the boys to collaborate in the mutual creation of meaning' (34). He then considers the company's approach to putting an early modern play on its feet. Through close descriptions of specific passages of staging — for example, of a densely populated scene in Jonson's *The Silent Woman*, or *Epicene* — he conveys Edward's Boys' alertness to 'where bodies might *intervene*' in the process of creating and conveying meaning, regardless of

‘whether or not the text seems specifically to demand such intervention’ (35–6; emphasis in original). Usefully, he argues that what happens in the company’s blocking process is not a realization of instructions latent in the text but rather ‘an *encounter*, a recognition that the text demands that *something* needs to happen and the implementation of collective expertise to initiate it’ (45; emphasis in original). After stressing the important role of movement-centred rehearsals led by Struan Leslie, which help the actors to develop ‘a shared corporeal vocabulary’ for each production (52), McCarthy goes on to link the company’s ethos to that of the sports teams in which many of them, as students, are also engaged. Through their embodied collaborations, he suggests, Edward’s Boys encourage us to imagine ‘the performance of early modern drama less as a predominantly text-based exercise and more as a system of behaviours and shared experiences’ (59–60).

This foregrounding of experience over product lies at the heart of McCarthy’s analysis of Edward’s Boys. Although he offers many illuminating examples of the company’s interpretative choices in relation to specific early modern plays, he is ultimately less interested in the meanings these choices might convey to contemporary spectators ‘than in the “infection” of text with stage embodiment and teamwork which allows contemporary audiences to grasp the theatrical nature of these plays’ (72–3). This approach occasionally conflicts, at least for this reader, with McCarthy’s stated aim of examining ‘what it means (and takes) to perform non-Shakespearean early modern drama today’ (8). I sometimes found myself wondering whether Edward’s Boys’ work illuminated contemporary relationships to these particular plays as much as it demonstrated practical means by which a company could bring all kinds of linguistically challenging, neglected plays (from the early modern period or not) alive on-stage. Further analyses of the company’s productions, which I hope McCarthy may offer in the future, might go deeper into the ways in which they have engaged with the unique aspects of early modern boys’ company repertoires that have been so well analyzed by scholars such as Lucy Munro. His wonderful recent book *Boy Actors in Early Modern England: Skill and Stagecraft in the Theatre* (Cambridge University Press, 2022) gives evidence of his deep understanding of this scholarship, which I would be fascinated to see him bring to bear on the work of Edward’s Boys and of other contemporary companies working on non-Shakespearean early modern drama.

Ultimately, however, the strengths of McCarthy’s approach greatly outweigh any limitations. He invites his reader into the life of this unusual company, laudably acknowledging its complexities and limitations — especially those grounded in the privilege enjoyed by male-identified students at an elite English grammar

school (55–7) — as well as its gifts. The voices of company members, archived through their interviews with McCarthy, movingly convey the joy, pride, camaraderie, and sense of achievement they find in working together to bring centuries-old plays alive. I was particularly fascinated by actor Dan Wilkinson's praise for the ways in which the 'younger boys learn from the older boys, [and] the older boys learn from the younger boys, too ... that's the way that it works' (64). As McCarthy notes, this 'pattern of knowledge transfer' between actors of different ages links the working relationships within Edward's Boys to the training regimes of early modern playing companies as imagined by scholars such as Evelyn Tribble (62, 66) — so, too, do the 'multiple connections' that McCarthy finds between 'the emotional lives of these schoolboys and their company's working practices and dramatic output' (61). In the wake of movements such as #MeToo and the interrogations they have encouraged of interpersonal relations within theatrical institutions, performance scholars are just beginning to think more deeply about how emotional forces inflect the work of contemporary theatre troupes — and how they may also have shaped the close-knit companies of the early modern stage. By taking seriously Edward's Boys' understanding of early modern drama as 'a site of body work, a place of physical experimentation, and a means of developing company identity through ensemble play and shared endeavour' (76), Harry McCarthy offers scholars one way to consider the performance of early modern drama as an affective and relational, as well as an interpretative and text-based, practice.