

Julie Ackroyd. *Child Actors on the London Stage, Circa 1600: Their Education, Recruitment and Theatrical Success*. Brighton: Sussex University Press, 2017. Pp viii, 231. Hardback £55.00. ISBN: 9781845198480.

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Renewed interest in early modern child actors has resulted in a number of recent monographs on the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century English children's playing companies. This work has built on twentieth-century theatre history to re-evaluate the children's repertoires, their acting styles, and the status of these companies in early modern theatrical culture. Julie Ackroyd's *Child Actors on the London Stage, Circa 1600* makes a fresh contribution to this body of work through its distinct focus on the education and employment conditions of child actors in the early seventeenth century. By reassessing the specific training and acting styles of child players in the context of wider histories of education, child employment, and performance, Ackroyd persuasively argues that understanding the education of these children is crucial to a consideration of their theatrical presentations.

Ackroyd begins with close attention to one of the few extant extra-dramatic documents pertaining to the child players: the 'Clifton vs Robinson' Star Chamber case ca 1600. This legal complaint brought by Henry Clifton over the impressment of his son, Thomas, who was allegedly seized and detained to begin 'the base trade of a mercynary enterlude player' (2), has become a widely recognized source in the history of early modern children's performance. Yet Ackroyd urges paying renewed attention to it. *Child Actors* begins with a detailed evaluation of what this case reveals about the boys taken as players, their educational backgrounds, and the training the playing company provided to them. By situating this in chapter 1 within new research into the history of impressment and of child employment and original examinations of the connections of the other boys named in the document to educational and religious institutions, Ackroyd poses two crucial questions. Firstly, were the methods outlined in the Clifton case typical or atypical of the modes of recruiting child actors in the early seventeenth century? Secondly, were boys being targeted for their skills? While Ackroyd acknowledges that the answer to the first question is difficult to ascertain, she considers this document's potential as both exemplary of recruitment processes and as uncommon through a careful analysis of the complaint itself and evidence of the changing employment practices of children's companies. Her suggestion that this impressment may

have been a particular response to the need to recruit in haste in order to facilitate the development of the newly formed Children of the Chapel at Blackfriars is an intriguing one. The second fascinating question frames the rest of this comprehensive study, paving the way for an in-depth examination of the conditions of children's performance at both Paul's and Blackfriars in the period.

This examination takes the form of five further chapters on different dimensions of children's training and performance. Chapter 2 considers the training of boys provided by early modern grammar schools. It evaluates humanist educational programs as ideal training for the child actor. Focusing particularly on education in pronunciation, memorization, gesture, rhetoric, and oration, and on the grammar school boy's exposure to Ovid, Plautus, and Terence as well as the practice of participating in dramatic performance in the school, it makes a strong case that grammar school education facilitated 'easy transfer onto the commercial stage for the boys' (23). Chapter 3 develops the contention that the grammar school use of Ovid to personate female characters meant school boys already had the basic training for performing female roles, and Ackroyd examines the techniques used by the children's companies to portray women on stage, arguing for the suitability of boys for this task due to both their training and their own indeterminate gendered state. Chapter 4 extends this discussion of gender and performance to address the particular challenges for boys in representing male adulthood. Both of these chapters productively explore intersections between gender and age. Through attention to acting styles, the body in performance, and the use of prosthetics such as beards on stage, the chapters argue for the distinctive style of the children's playing companies in the early years of the seventeenth century and shed light on wider performance practices.

Chapters 5 and 6 explore the connections between the children's companies and other performance contexts in more detail through an analysis of the exchange of playtexts. Chapter 5 focuses on the changing use of inductions by the children's playing companies and analyses the induction written for John Marston's *The Malcontent* when it moved from children's company to adult company. Arguing that inductions functioned to introduce audiences to the distinct acting styles, theatres, and performance contexts of the Paul's- and Blackfriars-based children's companies, Ackroyd reveals the transformation of these companies during the first few years of the seventeenth century as the children matured and their skills developed. She ultimately proposes that within a few years they were marketing themselves as 'competent, attractive, professional actors rather than infant prodigies or strange sideshow oddities' (142). Chapter 6 provides a detailed study of one playwright — William Percy — who wrote with professional acting

children in mind but whose manuscript plays were performed by amateur adult companies. Exploring this point of connection, Ackroyd argues for similarities between amateur adult companies and professional children's companies in terms of training and audience knowledge. She also builds a compelling case for the importance of Percy's work to a consideration not only of children's acting styles but of early modern theatrical practices more generally.

Although the chapters of this study highlight specific authors such as William Percy and John Marston and allude to a range of playwrights associated with the children's companies, including Ben Jonson and Thomas Middleton, they do not offer readings of their work. Instead, Ackroyd uses the plays to shed light on the child actors, their training, and their performance styles by considering the evidence these texts provide within wider social, cultural, and educational contexts. This is facilitated by an impressive engagement with existing work on the children's companies combined with a fresh consideration of early modern education and performance. While positioning the early seventeenth-century versions of the children's companies at Paul's and Blackfriars within diverse shifts in education and training, Ackroyd demonstrates nice attention to the local contexts of these companies and the extent to which they changed over a short period of time. *Child Actors* thus makes a fine contribution to the history of the children's playing companies and to debates on their commercial and professional status through a detailed analysis of the child actors' skills. The Clifton Star Chamber case, Ackroyd proves, merits this renewed attention and provides a valuable starting point for a new evaluation of early modern child actors.

