

Eleanor Rycroft. *Facial Hair and the Performance of Early Modern Masculinity*. London and New York: Routledge, 2019. Pp. 198. Hardback \$175.00. ISBN: 9781138578203. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351265041>.

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In *Facial Hair and the Performance of Early Modern Masculinity*, Eleanor Rycroft focuses our attention intensely on the hair that adorned early modern faces and the role that it played in both the production and the destabilization of early modern masculinities. She argues convincingly that for early modern men, beards were not just an ephemeral fashion statement, but instead a primary marker of identity and a vital signifier within the discursive field of gender. This was perhaps nowhere more evident than in the early modern English theatre, where a company of adult, adolescent, and child actors (many of whom would have sported facial hair of their own to varying degrees) would in turn don a succession of prosthetic beards to portray characters whose identities were visibly defined by their facial hair, in front of audience members who in the same moment were fashioning their own social identities through the cuts of their beards. Moreover, beards at the time were an important symbol of authenticity — men would swear by their beards, after all — and this makes the early modern theatre’s widespread employment of artificial beards especially intriguing. Rycroft’s book makes a thoroughly compelling case that the network of beards used for performances of gender on early modern stages offers us a valuable entry point for discussing ‘questions of identity, social status, and the operations of power’ across the early modern period (9).

The book’s four chapters take the large cluster of interconnected early modern masculine identities and organize them broadly by age. Chapter one begins by focusing on beardless boys and the various ways in which male youths were dressed up and decorated or ‘trimmed’ for early Tudor theatrical entertainments such as pageants, progresses, and maskings, with particularly rewarding attention paid to the boy riders who appear in the Chester cycle plays. Rycroft then proceeds to consider various examples of smooth-skinned Ganymedes and other eroticized and objectified boys who appear onstage in early modern drama. This leads her to a broader discussion of the phenomenon of boy actors wearing prosthetic beards to perform adult male roles, in which she argues that these false-bearded boy actors should not only be imagined as performing incipient sexuality, but also incipient subjectivity and incipient sociality. The chapter concludes with

an exploration of smooth gallants on the early modern stage, young men who would have been capable of growing beards but who remained defiantly and brazenly barefaced, rejecting the demands of a gendered adult world.

Chapter two, perhaps the most exciting chapter in the book, develops the category of 'liminal masculinity' to accommodate a variety of adult men who have not yet settled into a fully socialized position as a husband and householder, a stage of life that Rycroft wryly describes as 'the Hal Phase' (93). She directs our attention to a number of alternative early modern masculinities, all of which are performed and expressed through facial hair in substantive ways. The homosocial culture of soldiers, for example, is negotiated surprisingly often in terms of facial hair, as beards are compared, analyzed, praised, insulted, and sometimes even pulled, tweaked, or plucked. Soldiers who have returned from war but not properly integrated into society may also take on a variety of distinctively bearded social identities, including the braggart and the carpet knight. Shaggy-bearded prophets also signal their anti-social alterity through their unkempt facial hair. But most important of all in this group of identities situated at 'peripheral space of patriarchy' (92) are actors themselves, whose trade relies on the use of a false beard, 'a troublingly detachable item' (87), one used both to project an identity into the world but also to conceal the true expression of one's face.

The subject of chapter three is 'Maturity: Lovers and Bearded Manhood', and here Rycroft makes the case that mature masculinity in the early modern period was marked by a reaggregation into a socially stable role after a return from study, from travel, or from war. In the first two chapters, her analyses draw on an impressively wide array of texts, some of them delightfully obscure, ranging from early Tudor interludes through to Restoration drama. In this chapter, however, she chooses instead to develop extended close readings of three much-studied Shakespeare plays — *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *Coriolanus* — and this shift in strategy seems somewhat abrupt. The selection of these three plays in particular seems somewhat odd, since all of their title characters are 'unable to assume the next phase of their masculinity' (100) and thus might be better suited to the previous chapter than to this one. That said, all three of these readings are sharp and insightful, opening new windows in familiar texts, engaging adeptly and productively with theory, and potently reframing the way we think about gender in Shakespeare's tragedies.

The final chapter considers 'Old Age: Greybeards and the Decline of Manliness', unpacking some of the competing early modern narratives about masculinity in advanced years, especially the tension we find between early modern culture's respect for wisdom and experience and its discomfort with deterioration

and mortality. Rycroft demonstrates once again that beards function as potent symbols for and all-pervasive markers of the complexity of early modern gender. Other sections in this chapter focus on generational conflicts between the old and the young, on social attitudes toward the 'unseasonable lechers' (159) in May to December romances, and finally on the disenfranchisement of the elderly. There is a great deal to like in this chapter, so much so, in fact, that my principal critique is that I wish there were more of it.

Overall, this is a terrific book, one that reminds us how transformative the best examples of new materialist criticism can be. It is valuable not only for the clarity and usefulness of its argument and for the implications it will have for our ongoing renegotiations of early modern drama and gender, but also for the treasure trove of details and anecdotes it amasses by way of illustration. Plus, Rycroft's prose is a delight to read, erudite but unpretentious, theoretically sophisticated without ever seeming self-indulgent. At the same time, however, the book clearly highlights and lays the foundations for other pressing projects to come: it signals that there remains important work still to be done exploring the role that facial hair played in the early modern performance of race and ethnicity, for example, as well as on the way that early modern non-binary, genderfluid, and trans identities find representation in this discursive field. In *Bartholomew Fair*, Quarlous makes reference to a 'nest of beards' (87) that he has in a trunk. Rycroft's admirable book makes it clear that we would do well to spend more time combing through and untangling this nest.

