



Nathan Field, 1587-1619, London actor and member of the King's Men.

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## Ros King

### Strange attr-actors on the early modern stage

Critics have always found it conceptually difficult to understand the effects on early modern audiences of the use of boy actors. Thirty years ago, under the influence of the acres of anti-theatrical polemic that accompanied the emergence of the first fully professional and purpose built theatres in England, we were confidently told that audiences invariably saw (and lusted over) the boy beneath his often cross-dressed costume. This 'child-actor-as-catamite' school of criticism has since given way to a refusal to acknowledge the issue at all: child actors can be very accomplished (which is true); and the so-called boys' companies began to retain their best actors into adulthood (also probably true). Unfortunately for those of us interested in the tremendous flowering of extremely powerful dramatic writing for those child companies, this latter insistence that there is no problem and that we should therefore treat this performance tradition and its literature as no different from any other category of play, has gone in parallel with a desire in the professional theatre to 'keep it real', 'truthful', etc., and an anxiety about apparently arcane language which, it is assumed, modern audiences are not going to be able to understand. As a result, and despite projects like the Oxford Middleton and the online Brome, most non-Shakespearean plays have quietly dropped out of the performance canon.

This paper seeks to re-open the question by situating the idea of the boy actor, who plays mature adult male as well as female roles, within the panoply of other non-realistic but nevertheless emotionally powerful modes of performance, including puppetry, dance, dumbshow, and song.

*Ros King is Professor of English Studies at the University of Southampton. A musician and theatre director as well as an academic, she has worked as a dramaturg with Shakespeare's Globe in London, the English Shakespeare Company, and Shakespeare Santa Cruz (California). She has edited a range of early modern plays and poems, including The Works of Richard Edwards (Manchester UP), and revised editions of Shakespeare's Comedy of Errors (CUP) and Marlowe's Faustus (New Mermaids). She was co-editor (with Paul Franssen) of the collection Shakespeare and War. Her monographs include Shakespeare: A Beginner's Guide, and Cymbeline: Constructions of Britain. She is currently working on a cultural history of play and playfulness.*