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Edited by Kate Chedgoy, Susanne Greenhalgh and Robert Shaughnessy

Excerpt

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I

*Introduction**Robert Shaughnessy*

On the front cover of this book is a detail from a photograph, taken in 1930, of a group of some thirty children in an amateur performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, designed and directed by Rowena Cade for the open-air theatre at Minack in Cornwall.¹ Standing, crouching and kneeling before a woodland backdrop, some with arms draped over others' shoulders, others clutching garlands and long wands (excepting one figure towards the extreme left of the picture, who scowls at the camera, arms defiantly folded), these young persons range in age from preschool to teenage. Clad in home-sewn tights, tunics, acorn-cup headgear and (for Oberon and Titania) cloaks and ruffs, the members of this motley assembly of elves, sprites and pixies squint uncomfortably into the glare of an English sun that strips the sylvan scene of any vestige of nocturnal mystery or magic. Still, the broad provenance of this memento of Shakespearean performance is readily identifiable, even if the nature of the children's investment in the event it commemorates is not; it images a relationship between Shakespeare, childhood and performance that is liable to provoke a variety of reactions, ranging from indulgent amusement to faint nausea. On the one hand, the conjunction of the child, the fairy, performance and Shakespeare may evoke a lost time and space of naïve pleasure and innocent make-believe, a prospect to be contemplated with deep nostalgia, as befitting the *Dream's* special status as the scene of many Shakespeare-lovers' first encounter with the Bard.² On the other hand, the stern faces of this particular cast of juveniles, which suggest that few of them are actually having much fun, may also remind us that the ideal of childhood performance to which the image alludes is a retrospective adult fantasy, one shaped not only by a careful monitoring and censorship of the less than child-friendly dimensions of Shakespeare's play, but also by a partial and selective understanding of the nature of childhood itself, of what it is and of what it is made to signify.

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For those who believe that *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Shakespeare more generally, is for grown-ups, there is something faintly embarrassing about this vision of a performance vocabulary that is still current at the turn of the twenty-first century; while for those whose business it is to make the writer and his works available and attractive to the young, there is little in it to suggest that Shakespeare might be in any way cool. Stationed at the boundary of a dark forest which they are best off not to enter just yet, the children can be seen to occupy a threshold, or liminal, space more thoroughly overdetermined than either they or their photographer probably realized: costumed for the play but not yet engaged in performance of it, and thus inhabiting the realm between theatre and the everyday, between nature and nurturing culture, and between reality, desire and dreams, the child-as-fairy poses as an awkward, makeshift hybrid, epitomizing adult ambivalences about what to make of, and how to deal with, his or her beguiling and disquieting otherness.

One would not want to read too much into what is, after all, only a snapshot taken on the margins of Shakespearean performance history. But the mixed emotions that it involves may provide one kind of clue as to why, despite the complex and varied significances of the figure of the child in the Shakespearean canon and within early modern culture, and despite the rich histories of negotiation, exchange and appropriation that have characterized the works' subsequent relations to the cultures of childhood in the literary, educational, theatrical and cinematic realms, the subject matter of this volume has, until relatively recently, been a surprisingly underdeveloped area of scholarly investigation. As far as the first three centuries of Shakespearean criticism were concerned, the children in, behind or implied by Shakespeare's plays were intermittently seen but rarely heard about (and certainly not heard). Initially, the references to children and childhood were anecdotal, incidental or pejorative: Shakespeare's own boyhood and youth is briefly mentioned in Nicholas Rowe's biographical sketch of 1709, in the shape of the mythical episode of juvenile delinquency (deer poaching) that resulted in his departure from Warwickshire. For Alexander Pope, Shakespeare's youthful exuberance and inexperience accounts for the 'irregularity' of his drama, 'more like an ancient majestick piece of *Gothic Architecture*' than 'a neat Modern building', in which 'many of the parts are childish, ill-plac'd, and unequal to its grandeur'.³

The emergence of a conception of Shakespeare as a 'child of nature' towards the end of the eighteenth century, the formation of a new market

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of juvenile readers of Shakespeare, and the increasing importance of children and childhood more generally within the cultural imaginary, shifted the terms of reference to a certain extent, but even the Romantic critics demonstrated little sustained interest in the topic: Samuel Taylor Coleridge's musings on Shakespeare's 'fondness for children', for example, went no further than a brief manuscript note listing 'his Arthur; the sweet scene in the *Winter's Tale* between Hermione and the little prince; nay, even Evans's examination of Mrs Page's school-boy'.⁴ Edmund Dowden's widely read and influential manual of Victorian Shakespearean interpretation, *Shakspeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art* (1875), adopted an evolutionary approach to the author's development 'from youth to full maturity' but passed over his formative years fairly speedily, and refers to children in the plays themselves only once, in the form of a fatherly pat on the heads of the 'exquisite girlish figures' of the last plays, 'children who have known no sorrow, over whom is shed a magical beauty, an ideal light, while above them Shakspeare is seen, as it were, bowing tenderly'.⁵

The high Victorian sentiment of this picture of idealized girlhood as the locus of embodiment of innocence, purity and grace hardly needs elaborating upon (and might be usefully contrasted with the appropriation of Shakespeare's girlhoods by earlier nineteenth-century writers such as Mary Cowden Clarke and Anna Jameson), but its legacy is still evident at the beginning of the twentieth century in the more restrained, though still pretty idealized, perception of the Shakespearean child that is offered in the criticism of Dowden's major immediate successor, A. C. Bradley. Pausing for a moment in his analysis of *Macbeth* in *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904), Bradley remarks on the 'somewhat curious' appearance of 'Shakespeare's boys' in 'tragic or semi-tragic dramas', citing Arthur and Mamillius as examples of Shakespeare's 'power of pathos'; as a group, the boys are 'affectionate, frank, brave, high-spirited ... amusing and charming as well as pathetic; comical in their mingled acuteness and *naïveté*, charming in their confidence in themselves and the world, and in the seriousness with which they receive the jocosity of their elders'.⁶ As far as Bradley and his contemporary readers were concerned, this was all that needed to be said on the topic of Shakespeare's children, but this did not stop him being taken to task in the early 1930s by L. C. Knights, who notoriously posed in rhetorical form the question that Bradley didn't ask ('How Many Children had Lady Macbeth?') in order to discredit what he saw as the kind of irresponsibly speculative, character-based criticism in which 'the detective interest supersedes the critical'.⁷ The question is not

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worth debating, or even considering, because it is irrelevant to the task of working out how the Shakespearean text ‘communicates a rich and controlled experience by means of words – words used in a way to which, without some training, we are no longer accustomed to respond’;⁸ the last thing the serious critic wants to be bothered by in this context is a group of pesky hypothetical kids. Even so, but not really surprisingly, the child also serves another rhetorical purpose in Knights’s discourse, which is to act as a marker of the difference between naïve and sophisticated responses to the text: ‘in school children are taught to think that they have “appreciated” the poet if they are able to talk about the characters’.⁹

Knights’s polemical formalism is representative of a major strand of mid-twentieth-century criticism in terms of a preoccupation with dehumanized textuality seemingly at odds with the historical and cultural concerns that underpin this collection; though, as Carol Chillington Rutter observes, it is somewhat ironic that the critical text which is widely regarded as brilliantly exemplary of the New Critical method advocated by Knights (Cleanth Brooks’s ‘The Naked Babe and the Cloak of Manliness’ (1947)) comprehensively demonstrates the centrality of infancy, children and childhood to the image structure of *Macbeth*.¹⁰ In the past few decades, there has been a small but steady stream of articles and essays dealing with aspects of the relationship between Shakespeare, children and childhood, and early modern children have, from the early part of the twentieth century onwards, featured as historical subjects rather than metaphors in a number of works investigating the linked phenomena of the boy player and the chorister companies.¹¹ By and large, however, the critical and imaginative tradition which has engaged most directly and fully with the broadest spectrum of Shakespearean childhoods has been primarily addressed to young readers themselves, from the Lambs’ *Tales from Shakespear* (1807) through to the school editions and related educational materials currently in widespread use. It is, I suggest, not coincidental that this pattern of critical production and consumption has historically tended to reflect a gender divide as well as a generational one. As Ann Thompson and Sasha Roberts point out in their introduction to an anthology of female-authored Shakespearean scholarship and commentary that spans the period from the late seventeenth to the nineteenth century, ‘both in England and America, women were to play a large part in the growing “youth market” for Shakespeare in the nineteenth century, preparing juvenile editions and numerous adaptations of Shakespeare’s “tales”, with the aim of introducing and popularising Shakespeare’s plays’. While this may partly reflect a traditionally patriarchal division of

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scholarly labour so that the production of child-centred or child-related materials falls within the purview of the woman's primary responsibility for homemaking and childrearing, female scholars also found opportunities to 'use their writing on Shakespeare to raise issues of particular concern to women', addressing 'subjects such as women's education, women's role in public life, and power relations between the sexes in society and in marriage'.¹² Viewed in this context, even Clarke's now notorious narrative elaborations in *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* (1850) – which in their own time were critically well received – deserve to be read not only as naïvely novelistic concoctions of a nonexistent subtext but as attempts to engage constructively a Shakespeare who, as she put it, 'has seen most deeply into the female heart . . . has most vividly depicted it in its strength, and in its weakness'.¹³

In this respect, then, the convergence of intellectual enquiry, pedagogic intervention, creative appropriation, and social and political activism, which in the work of nineteenth-century women Shakespearean scholars manifests itself in materials both concerned with childhood and produced for children, provides an important (and only recently acknowledged) precursor of the project of late twentieth-century feminism, which is itself one of the shaping theoretical, critical and political contexts of this collection. Childhood, and its developmental relation to the construction of adult gender and sexual identities, has been an implicit concern of modern feminist scholarship since its moment of emergence in the early 1980s, in a variety of forms: in psychoanalytic criticism, which has anatomized and interrogated Shakespearean representations of masculinity and femininity by means of a Freudianism reread in the light of Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva and others;¹⁴ in studies which have scrutinized the sexual ambiguity of the 'boy actress';¹⁵ and, more recently, in a developing body of work which, as Catherine Belsey puts it, seeks 'to historicize and thus denaturalize family values' by investigating 'the story of the nuclear family . . . from romance through marital conflict to parenthood and the relations between the children'.¹⁶ The chapters in this collection build upon these areas of investigation, elaborating their established emphases on ideology, power and sexuality, through a focus on children and childhoods, both actual and imaginary, early modern and more recent. They respond to recent scholarship which reassesses performance by the young in Renaissance culture, and in royal and aristocratic households as well as the boy and adult companies. There is an equal attention to the current strong interest in manifestations of Shakespeare in popular, visual and media culture, from the eighteenth century to the present day, and in

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a range of genres, from children's books and magazines, to theatrical memoirs, documentary and animated films, and tie-in Shakespeare products.

The volume's dual concern with the historical origins and contexts of Shakespearean childhoods and their continuing history of cultural reinvention is reflected in its two-part structure. The chapters in the first part, 'Shakespeare's children', all address, from various angles, the questions of what being a child might have meant, both to children, and to adult others, during this period, and of how these meanings were reflected, constructed and negotiated by children both as the subjects and the agents of fictional, theatrical and poetic representation. As Kate Chedgzoy points out in her introduction to part I, the marginality – bordering on invisibility – of early modern children in many existing accounts of Shakespeare's England and its drama needs to be drastically rethought in the light of 'evidence for early modern children's cultural presence and agency', including both the material artefacts they made and used and the work they performed, which is 'richer and more extensive' than has previously been thought (p. 28); the chapters that follow utilize that evidence, as well as the evidence of plays, poems and other literary and visual texts, to begin to recover the hidden history they trace. Reading the conventions for theatrically invoking childhood alongside the evolving techniques of children's portraiture during the early seventeenth century, Catherine Belsey examines the particularity of Shakespeare's own contribution to the emergence of a recognizably modern conception of the loving nuclear family, wherein childhood incrementally acquires 'a life of its own', having previously been 'barely visible . . . as a distinctive state of being' (p. 33).

The idea that boundaries between childhood and adulthood are both porous and ambiguous in Shakespeare's works is also explored, from the standpoint of affective relations within the family, and between fathers and daughters in particular, in Hattie Fletcher and Marianne Novy's chapter, which identifies a recurrent trope of paternal loss that is both biographically and culturally resonant, in the context of a drama in which, 'for parents . . . the relationship to their children is dramatized as crucial to their identity' (p. 49). In A. J. Piesse's chapter, which addresses the subject of Renaissance education, Shakespeare's children are discussed as textual constructs whose identities, and roles within both the historical narratives and the dramas they inhabit, are fashioned within the discourses of early modern pedagogy, in an examination of 'the dramatic significance of the relationship between school texts, texts of formation,

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the process of history and the child figure' (p. 64). Drawing upon the evidence of the performance practices of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century children's companies, in relation to the complex dynamics of the juvenile impersonation of adult masculinity, Lucy Munro offers a reading of *Coriolanus* as a play in which Shakespeare 'attempts to overwrite children's performance', especially those recently seen at the Blackfriars playhouse for which it was written, 'picking up and reworking certain aspects of children's performance, specifically their tradition of satiric detachment and their exploitation of the distance between actor and role' (p. 84). The section concludes with Patricia Phillippy's investigation of the significance, both literal and metaphorical, of images of procreation, infant mortality and mourning in two contrasting sonnet sequences: Shakespeare's, and Anne de Vere's 'Four epytaphes'. In both, Phillippy argues, gender identity is specifically 'predicated upon procreation and child-loss', and in this respect the sequences are deeply indicative not only of 'early modern formulations of gender in relation to absent children' (p. 97) but also of the struggle between the competing conceptions of masculine and feminine reproductive and textual creativity, parenthood and authorship that they encode.

The essays in the second part of the volume, 'Children's Shakespeares', selectively address the cultural history of the relationship between Shakespeare(s) and childhood(s) from a period spanning the eighteenth century to the present. In her introduction to this section, Susanne Greenhalgh contextualizes the case studies that follow by outlining the ways in which Shakespeare and the cultural construction of childhood have been interlinked since the early modern period, with a particular emphasis on the ideological purposes to which these relationships have been put, as the place of children in society has changed. As Naomi J. Miller demonstrates in her survey of two centuries of Shakespearean adaptations for children, which charts a shift from a pedagogy of moral improvement to more recent 'child-centred' notions of play, changing expectations of the nature and limits of children's agency during this period have been vividly reflected through the tactics of textual abridgement and adaptation, and illustration and exposition, adopted by authors, artists and educators. One of the key instruments for disseminating Shakespeare's works throughout popular culture, and to child readers in particular, during the Victorian period was the children's periodical, and in her essay on this publishing tradition Kathryn Prince traces the strategies through which they not only made Shakespeare available in a popular and accessible

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form, but also contributed to his, and its, role in ‘the formation of English national identity’, whereby a ‘growing sense of Shakespeare’s centrality and importance was transmitted in the nineteenth century beyond the purview of gentlemen, scholars and poets to members of society who might never choose to read poetry or literary criticism’ (p. 153). The cultural heritage of Victorian Shakespeare also informs Pascale Aebischer’s chapter, which examines the iconic centrality of Shakespeare within the autobiographical self-fashionings of two members of Edwardian England’s leading theatrical dynasties, Ellen Terry and Edward Gordon Craig, and, by extension, ‘Shakespeare’s role in shaping the narratives of the childhood and adolescence of these nineteenth-century theatre practitioners’, which is seen to constitute ‘the very way personal experience is conceptualized and the experience of growing up is understood’ (p. 169).

The final three chapters in the volume focus upon more recent examples of, and current concerns about, the relations between Shakespearean childhoods, media and cultural forms. Situating Shakespeare within children’s literature, Kate Chedgzoy examines how his iconic presence has functioned within a number of recent novels to explore the performance of boyhood, in a context of considerable cultural and social anxiety about it. In a reading of Susan Cooper’s *King of Shadows* (1999), which, as one of the most intriguing recent examples of the genre of Shakespeare-related fictions, attempts to bridge the gap between the modern and the early modern through the device of time travel, Chedgzoy shows how a Shakespearean reframing of contemporary boyhood can enable more open and diverse ways of thinking about this contested and contentious phase of childhood. Susanne Greenhalgh’s chapter, which locates the screen history of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* within the modern traditions – and conceptualizations – of child performance, demonstrates how ‘attending to child actors of Shakespeare, as well as to their roles, reveals how the shifting constructions of childhood current in different eras have been refracted, and perhaps reformulated, through Shakespearean performance’ (p. 201).

Shakespeare’s exhaustingly constant (re)mediatization in ever-more unexpected cultural forms and contexts, including cartoons and sitcoms aimed at young viewers whose acquaintance with the works of Shakespeare is, at best, partial and fragmentary and, more typically, defined by incomprehension, indifference or derision, is the subject of Richard Burt’s chapter, which investigates Shakespeare’s position ‘between (‘tween) media markets’ as well as describing the ‘new space that Shakespeare

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inhabits between childhood and adolescence, namely the tween (no apostrophe), a space that marks the fluidity of both terms that flank it'. Citing a variety of media texts in which Shakespeare remains – sometimes bafflingly – present as a cultural marker and reference point, Burt suggests that 'tween' culture 'has increasingly destabilized and even collapsed the distinction between child and adult'. Thus 'what emerges in the tween market is less the disappearance of childhood than the disappearance of adulthood: the tripartite distinction between child, teenager and adult is displaced by a new tripartite distinction between child, tween and teenager' (p. 219). Finally, in Appendix 1, Mark Lawhorn provides a detailed and comprehensive listing and categorization of the children in Shakespeare's plays, a taxonomy which, as Lawhorn proposes, 'is meant to suggest a generous range of performance possibilities' (p. 233).

There is, it seems, a world of difference between the iconic naïvety of the photographic image of Shakespearean childhood performance with which I began this introduction and the hypermediatized world of media cool invoked in Burt's chapter; whether this is to be judged a matter for mourning or for celebration is perhaps a matter of both personal taste and generational positioning. Looking again at the monochrome image of the 1920s English children's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, I am struck by its inadvertent pathos, a sadness that proceeds in part, from what Susan Sontag once defined as any photograph's status 'as a message from time past', irrefutably redolent of 'another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability',¹⁷ and is compounded by the awareness that three-quarters of a century on from the moment it captures, even the youngest of its participants is more likely than not to have achieved an immateriality far more enduring, than that of a stage fairy. In its own way the photograph quite precisely encapsulates some of the dynamics of the different ways of researching Shakespearean childhoods that are explored in this book. It is enormously rich and resonant as a screen for adult projections; but one could also, if so inclined and given time, try to excavate the historical child subjects posed in it, what they thought of the whole thing, what became of them subsequently, what cultural and pedagogic role amateur performance played in the lives of early twentieth-century middle-class English white children, and so on. I am also aware, or hope I am aware, of a sense of optimism, born out of the conviction not only that the collective act of performance, like the makeshift and temporary experience of being magically, Shakespeareanly, other, is a significant marker in a young life that is worthy of fond record, but also that it participates in an unofficial history of make-believe in

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which the relationships between play, role-play and a play are rather more fluent and flexible than an allegedly more mature and sophisticated understanding of Shakespearean theatre would seem to demand. In this respect, as in others, the spectacle of the performing, and not-quite-performing, Shakespearean child may well prompt us to think again about the adult theatres, and cultures, that he or she both does, and does not, mimic, and may or may not eventually inhabit. If, as the essays in this collection richly demonstrate, there is much in the topic of Shakespeare and childhood to be discovered and revisited, its capacity to make us take another look at the meanings of adulthood, Shakespearean and otherwise, is by no means the least of it. But it is the agency of Shakespeare's children, and of the children who have continued to engage Shakespeare in performance, in reading and conversation, and through the arts of the imagination, that are the focus of this book.

NOTES

- 1 For an account of the work at Minack, see Michael Dobson, 'Shakespeare Exposed: Outdoor Performance and Ideology, 1880–1940', in Peter Holland, ed., *Shakespeare, Memory and Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 256–77. Many thanks to Michael Dobson for bringing this picture to our attention.
- 2 To take a pair of examples immediately to hand, the Arden 2 and Oxford editions of this play, which are otherwise scrupulously adults-only, both anchor their introductions in childhood reminiscence: thus Harold Brooks records his 'first experience of theatre: a matinee of Granville Barker's famous production, to which at the age of seven I was taken by my aunts' (The Arden Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (London: Methuen, 1979), p. ix); while Peter Holland, similarly, recalls it as 'the first Shakespeare play that I can remember seeing . . . Peter Hall's production in Stratford in 1959 when I was eight' (The Oxford Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. v). Rarely is the boyhood of Shakespeare's editors and critics, a Barrie-esque world of aunts and special theatre trips, so directly – and longingly – evoked.
- 3 Alexander Pope, 'Preface to *The Works of Shakespeare*' (1725), in D. Nichol Smith, ed., *Eighteenth Century Essays on Shakespeare* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 58.
- 4 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Shakespeare's Children: The Correct Master', in Terence Hawkes, ed., *Coleridge on Shakespeare* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 274.