David Mann examines the influence of the Elizabethan cross-dressed tradition on the performance and conception of Shakespeare’s female roles through an analysis of all 205 extant plays written for the adult theatre. The study provides both a historical context, showing how performance practice developed in the era before Shakespeare, and a comparative one, in revealing how dramatists in general treated their female characters and the influence their characterisation had upon Shakespeare’s writing. The book challenges current views of the sexual ethos of Elizabethan theatre, offering instead a picture of Shakespeare which pays less attention to his supposed gender politics and more to his ability to exploit the cross-dressed convention as a dramatic medium. The late-adolescent performer identified here, more capable of empathy, perhaps, than the received version of the ‘boy actress’ but often mockingly satirical, was ultimately, Mann argues, disengaged from the roles he played and a spokesman for the male point of view.

DAVID MANN has directed, designed and acted in many theatrical productions and was in charge of Drama and Theatre Studies at Huddersfield University. He is the author of The Elizabethan Player: Contemporary Stage Representations (1991) and has also published several articles and reviews.
To my wife Carole and daughters Miranda and Eleanor
# Contents

## List of tables and illustrations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of tables and illustrations</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Preliminary: the persistence of all-male theatre

- ‘Playing the woman’s part’ | 1, 4

## Introduction: the significance of the performer

- Shakespeare and the critics | 9
- Shakespeare and the performers | 24

## 1 Age and status

- The argument for juvenile performers | 31
- The argument for young adults | 33
- Conclusion | 43

## 2 Erotic ambience

- The charge of homosexuality | 59
- The social construction of eroticism | 77
- Neo-platonism | 91

## 3 Stage costume and performer ethos | 102

## 4 Male didacticism and female stereotyping

- The negative consequences of stereotyping | 122
- Models and warnings | 123
- Heywood’s innocent adulteresses | 130
- Shakespeare and received character conventions | 144

## 5 Dramatic empathy and moral ambiguity

- The stage whore | 149
- The multi-dimensional female character | 160
List of contents

6 Sexual violence 186
7 Positive representations of young women 208
   Breeches roles and gender construction 223

Appendix: female characters in the adult repertory, 1500–1614 241
Notes 246
Bibliography 266
Index of adult repertory 280
General index 285
Tables and illustrations

Tables
1. Numbers of female speaking roles  page 32
2. Ages of known performers of female roles, 1625–47  47

Figures
1. Male fashion c.1410  83
2. Fashion c.1470  84
3 and 4. Final designs for Queen’s costume for Chloridia  89, 90
5 and 6. Jealousy and Disdain from Chloridia  105, 106
7. The wife of an old-fashioned gentleman from Salmacida Spolia  107
8. Cupid from Chloridia  108
9. The farthingale  113
10. The peascod belly  114
11. Male costume design from The Shepherd’s Paradise  115

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