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978-1-108-81023-4 — Performing Early Modern Drama Beyond Shakespeare
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Introduction

A performance of *Henry V* at the Royal Shakespeare Company's Swan Theatre (Stratford-upon-Avon) in 2013. The lights came up on the academic-gowned Chorus (Tim Pigott-Smith) marking exercise books at an Elizabethan-style desk. Two schoolboys, in regulation navy-and-gold blazers and ties, thundered onto the stage, stopping in their tracks as they met 'Sir's' gaze. The Bishops of Canterbury and Ely – played, again, by two teenage boys – began their opening exchange. Two boys of more diminutive stature (dressed in the army fatigues of the Combined Cadet Force and waving cricket bats aloft) gave chase through the audience; and on the performance went, with more and more schoolboys filling the stage: a roguish, rugby-thug of a Bardolph with long socks trailing around his ankles; an adolescent Henry (complete with prefect badge) delivering his Harfleur speech from the top of a rugby line-out (see Figure 1). The elderly Pigott-Smith aside, the 'happy few' of this production were schoolboys through and through.

On the surface, this production of *Henry V* by the boys of King Edward VI Grammar School (KES) seems the most conventional of places to begin an Element in the Shakespeare Performance series. KES, after all, is the school Shakespeare himself is thought to have attended; and, in many ways, the production's impetus was conventional indeed, serving to mark the centenary of a performance of the same play by boys from the same school.[1] An all-boy production of Shakespeare's great paean to English military prowess certainly made sense in 1913. The 2013 production was, however, a rather different story. The company who took to the stage in this centenary production was, after all, not just any group of boys, but Edward's Boys, an amateur troupe composed entirely of pupils (aged 11–18) from the school which has been in continuous operation since 2008. Born initially out of a series of short scenes from early modern school plays filmed for Michael Wood's *In Search of Shakespeare* series (BBC2, 2003) and followed a year later by a sequence of workshops on early modern cross-dressing led by Carol Chillington Rutter, this company does not, as a rule, *do* Shakespeare. Instead, as their website states, they 'strive to explore the repertoire of the boys' companies' under the direction of the school's deputy headmaster, Perry Mills (*Edward's Boys*).

[1] Piggott-Smith was himself an 'Old Boy' of KES.

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Figure 1 Jeremy Franklin as Henry V and the Edward's Boys ensemble in the 2013 production of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, directed by Perry Mills. Photo by Gavin Birkett, courtesy of Edward's Boys.

Though a relatively new company, Edward's Boys has a densely layered history. Over a twelve-year period, the troupe has mounted full-scale productions of plays by Francis Beaumont, Thomas Dekker and John Webster, John Ford, Ben Jonson, John Lyly, Christopher Marlowe, John Marston, Thomas Middleton, and Thomas Nashe, in addition to shorter entertainments by the Tudor schoolmaster John Redford and the Caroline university playwright Charles May.[2] These productions constitute the largest corpus of early modern boy theatre in performance available for examination by twenty-first-century scholars, having been performed at the grammar school as well as on tour in venues as varied as Oxford college dining halls, the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, St Paul's Cathedral, a chapel in Montpellier, and a ducal palace in Genoa.[3] So extensive and varied is their

[2] See the Appendix for a full timeline of productions.
[3] A full archive of performances, recorded on DVD, is available for purchase from the company's website.

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repertory, in fact, that Andy Kesson is surely right to suggest, in a review of the company's 2018 production of John Lyly's *The Woman in the Moon*, that the boys have worked with plays by 'a more impressive range of early modern dramatists than any other theatre company has managed . . . including early modern theatre companies themselves' ('Women in the Moons').

By the time the company came to stage *Henry V*, then, their track record was not one of Shakespeare performance but of performing Marston's *The Dutch Courtesan* and *Antonio's Revenge*, extracts from Lyly's *Endymion* and *Mother Bombie*, Middleton's *A Mad World, My Masters* and *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, and, most recently, Dekker and Webster's *Westward Ho!*. As I discuss in this Element, these unique productions had been distinctly shaped by the company's institutional context and their development of a vigorous, contemporary performance style. I argue throughout that, in the hands of Edward's Boys, early modern drama becomes a site of sport and play, of physical experimentation, and of exploring contemporary boyhood. As my brief description at the outset of this Introduction suggests, the performance of *Henry V* was no different. Regular followers of Edward's Boys may, for instance, have recognised some of the overtly boyish set pieces from previous productions: the schoolboy choristers returning from the opening of *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (2010), the reckless throwing of props and furniture from the punk-infused *A Mad World, My Masters* (2009), the virtuosic sword fights and the tiny body of the Boy held cradled in Henry's arms repeating similar sequences in *Antonio's Revenge* (2011). Then there were the actors themselves: I would venture that there is no other actor than Edward's Boys' Jeremy Franklin to have played Henry V off the back of performing as Mistress Birdlime in *Westward Ho!*, Duke Piero in *Antonio's Revenge*, and Lady Kix in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*. In recycling similar motifs, costumes, and acting personnel, this production was, in Marvin Carlson's term, significantly 'haunted' (Carlson 8). The ghosts evoked here were not, however, recent stagings of Shakespeare's other plays but of works which had been virtually unstaged in the professional or amateur repertory for four centuries.[4]

[4] In the Appendix, I provide brief performance histories, including details of recent revivals, for each Edward's Boys play.

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Embedding *Henry V* within a wide-ranging non-canonical repertory was certainly the approach taken by company director Perry Mills:

> I wanted to say, 'we don't do Shakespeare – what is the point when he didn't write for boys?' But I didn't say that because it would have been ungracious . . . So it just stayed there for about a year – probably getting on for two years, where I was thinking, how the hell am I going to do *Henry V* with a bunch of schoolboys *in the Swan*? . . . And then I realised the obvious thing. They're just boys . . . Almost every production we've ever done in some way relates to education . . . The whole thing about education and school uniform and learning about history and lessons and on and on and on just fed through the whole thing. So actually the answer to that is that eventually we worked on it in exactly the same way as we do another one . . . the things that we had by that stage learned about early modern drama we just applied to that play, without thinking 'oh my God, it's Shakespeare'. There was no fear of that at all . . . Was I conscious of adopting a different approach? I really wasn't. I was worried about that, and then I realised that that was silly. I shouldn't be worried about it – just do it as a play. (personal interview, 2020)

For Mills and the company, the anxieties concomitant with performing *Shakespeare* were eventually allayed by the decision instead to perform *company*: 'It was sort of like "let's pretend nobody's ever done *Henry V*, and we'll do our take on it"' (personal interview, 2020). As Peter Kirwan put it in his review of the production, audience members were consistently invited 'to see the school performing itself haphazardly and playfully', a playfulness which 'kept in mind the youth of the participants, the war always to some extent a sport' ('Review: *Henry V*'). Subjecting the Shakespearean text to the shaping force of the company's 'usual' way of working enabled Edward's Boys to perform the play 'in exactly the same way as we do another one'.

In this Element, I explore the rehearsal and performance practices, born out of the company's important institutional contexts, that have given rise to

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a mode of production that makes it possible to 'just do' anything from *Mother Bombie* to *Henry V* 'as a play'. I argue that, for Edward's Boys, the guiding principle for the exploration of early modern drama through performance is one dominated by a mode of production which is infiltrated by the rhythms of school life and a collective, ensemble-based approach to practical experimentation. Even in the case of a play as canonical as *Henry V*, Edward's Boys provide a model of early modern performance in which the authorial text is vigorously reshaped by the company's distinctive identity: a wide-ranging, multi-authored repertory; an intensely collaborative approach to rehearsing and performing; and shared understandings and systems of behaviour. This identity, I suggest, can help us embark on Kirwan's project of developing 'a vocabulary of performance for early modern drama that shifts away from the all-pervasive Shakespeare filter' ('Not-Shakespeare' 100). Part of the value of Edward's Boys lies in their work's potential to help us tell an alternative story of early modern drama in contemporary performance to one dominated by Shakespeare-centrism and the primacy of the authorial text.

Though the company has amassed a significant following illustrious enough to include Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) directors,[5] this Element constitutes the first detailed study of Edward's Boys. I provide a comprehensive account of the company's origins, their rehearsal process, and their performances in order to think more carefully than has been typical about how the company's working practices help to shape a distinctive anti-canon of early modern dramatic performance. Given the Boys' ever-increasing popularity in UK academic and theatrical circles,[6] it is

[5] Gregory Doran, for instance, is enough of a fan to be able to recall roles that certain actors played years ago. Among the many documents held in the company's archive at KES – of which more in this section – is an undated letter sent to Mills after the production of *A Trick*, in which Doran recounts, 'I think the Courtesan was your Galatea, and I am certain I have seen Lucre before' ('Comments'). Doran was right on both counts – Charlie Waters played Galatea in 2014, and, by the time he played Lucre in *A Trick*, Joe Pocknell had performed in six Edward's Boys productions.

[6] The company's website provides enthusiastic testimonials by the likes of theatre historians Laurie Maguire and Tiffany Stern and Shakespearean actors such as

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surprising that to date the work of Edward's Boys has received relatively little scholarly attention aside from reviews of individual productions.[7] Scholars have occasionally engaged with Edward's Boys productions in their readings or performance histories of specific plays, in preparing new editions of writers such as Webster, or in wider discussions of the performance and transmission of early modern drama.[8] However, a deeper exploration of the company's work and what it tells us – or prompts us to ask – about early modern plays in performance by boy actors has yet to be written.

To this end, between 2018 and 2020 I undertook a detailed study of the company's operations from its origins to the present day, comprising extended visits to the company's archive, based in KES's Memorial Library, which contains uncatalogued holdings, including private correspondence, production sketches, scripts, and rehearsal schedules (as well as the odd bloody handkerchief or false cigarette). Surveyed in full, the archive provides ample scope to reconstruct a narrative of mounting Edward's Boys productions from casting to initial rehearsal to final performance. I have supplemented this narrative with analysis of numerous Edward's Boys productions, viewed live or on DVD. These performances show these archival traces in action and, most importantly, allow us better to understand how the company's performances of these historically underperformed plays distinctly reshape the texts for today's audiences. The ensemble nature of Edward's Boys' operations which is so demonstrably central to their performances is arguably best understood by speaking to the actors themselves: I therefore draw on the testimonies of a dozen actors who have performed in multiple company productions between 2010 and 2020, as

Anton Lesser, and the Boys are regularly invited to contribute to large-scale academic projects such as the Thomas Nashe Project and the forthcoming Oxford Marston. For more information on these projects, see *The Thomas Nashe Project* and *The Complete Works of John Marston*, respectively.

[7] A notable exception is the work Carol Chillington Rutter carried out with the company in the early years of its formation – see Section 1.

[8] See Aebischer, *Screening* 172–3, 228–9, 232, 238–42, 248, 250; Britland 75; Gunby, Carnegie, and Jackson 163–4; Maguire and Smith 184–6.

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well as Mills himself.[9] Throughout the study that follows, I am interested in how the company values and institutional dynamics that so demonstrably run through their practice intertwine productively with the early modern playtexts on which they base their performances. As the brief sketch of the company's *Henry V* has shown, this intertwining of practice and text is possible and productive even when it comes to the most canonical of plays, and it is my contention that we have much to gain from attending to such a dynamic in our study of early modern drama, Shakespearean and non-Shakespearean, in performance.[10]

Taking my cue from recent studies of how the work of individual companies and theatre practitioners contributes to the landscape of contemporary Shakespeare performance emblematised by Bloomsbury's Shakespeare in the Theatre series (see 'Shakespeare in the Theatre'), I suggest that the work of Edward's Boys allows us to take a large corpus of neglected early modern drama on Shakespearean terms, to consider it with the same level of seriousness, the same level of contemporaneity. Given their considerable experience of performing early modern drama as a cohesive company with an established set of working practices, Edward's Boys provide an important counterpoint to the Shakespeare-dominated companies on which the Bloomsbury series largely focuses (the non-Shakespearean productions by Cheek by Jowl and the American Shakespeare Center explored by Peter Kirwan and Paul Menzer

[9] To provide a sense of the actors' longevity and varied experience with the company, when introducing each of them I give details of all of the roles they have played in an accompanying footnote.

[10] It is worth stating at this point that my extensive work on this company has of necessity meant I have developed a close working relationship with the actors and particularly their director. In addition to multiple archival visits, rehearsal observations, and joining the company on tour around the UK, I have frequently socialised with Mills and have provided additional (though not financial) support to the company through assistance with advertising, providing costumes, producing a podcast about the cancelled 2020 production of *The Silent Woman* (see Appendix), and, in one happy turn of events, teaching an Edward's Boys alumnus who embarked on a degree at my university. It is my hope in the discussion that follows that my obvious enthusiasm for the company's work, and my close proximity to their operations, does not compromise the critical insights I offer.

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notwithstanding). Taken as a collective output, the company's work occupies a significant place on the map of non-Shakespearean early modern performance charted in Pascale Aebischer and Kathryn Prince's excellent *Performing Early Modern Drama Today* – a book whose 2012 publication came rather too early to discuss the work of Edward's Boys in more than a single footnote.[11] Given the company's longevity and consistency in personnel – many company members appear in multiple productions throughout their time at school – the wide-ranging repertory of Edward's Boys offers greater scope for detailed exploration than the standalone productions, script-in-hand readings, or research-based exercises discussed by Aebischer and Prince's contributors.

In what follows, then, I am above all concerned with what Edward's Boys has to tell us about what it means (and takes) to perform non-Shakespearean early modern drama today, as well as what such practices might mean for performing Shakespeare. I begin by situating the company within a recent performance tradition interested in early modern drama's 'historical recovery'. Here, I chart the company's gradual progression from its initial interest in the 'authentic' performance of gender to the development of a cohesive ensemble. Retaining the company's all-male ensemble even as KES has begun to accept girls into the school's Sixth Form has made it necessary for boys to continue playing women;[12] nevertheless, in recent years the company has moved further and further away from prosthetic gender performance. I suggest, however, that their rejection of 'authentic' performance practices does not lessen the value of their exercises in historical (re)performance: paradoxically, their contemporary approach to early modern drama strengthens their connections to the performances of the past.

Having critically defined the nature of the Edward's Boys project, I move more specifically to consider a central feature of their work on early modern plays – engaging closely with the authorial text. Though beginning with the text is obviously not unique to Edward's Boys, I demonstrate how from their earliest rehearsals the boys are trained to engage not only with the author's

[11] See Heron, Monk, and Prescott 162.

[12] In the British school system, pupils in the Lower Sixth Form (or Year 12) are typically aged between sixteen and seventeen; those in the Upper Sixth Form (Year 13) between seventeen and eighteen.

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language but with the text's implicit prompts for movement. In their text work, I argue, Edward's Boys reshape the words of the author through the body. The benefits of this approach become all the more clear when the actors begin to 'put the text on its feet' in the studio rehearsals later in the production process. In my discussion of these rehearsals, I centralise the boys' acts of taking 'ownership' of the play and its performance through physical experimentation. Here, I draw on my own observations of the company working through dense and knotty moments in rarely staged plays and particularly on their collaborative work with freelance movement director Struan Leslie to suggest that watching the company in the rehearsal room can alert us to the shaping effect collaborative, moving bodies can have on our sense of early modern drama's physical potential. The Edward's Boys rehearsal room, I suggest here, is a space in which the past and its performances can be re-encountered through the body.

In the final section, I consider how the Edward's Boys repertory is shaped not only by close attention to text and movement but also – and perhaps especially – by the company's distinctive institutional contexts. The company has fostered an intensely collaborative and self-iterating way of working since its formation through a continual emphasis on approaching performance as sport. I argue that the company's stage work is indelibly shaped by its basis in an elite grammar school which provides ample opportunity for sports practice and, concomitantly, by the ethos of healthy competition, teamwork, and camaraderie such an environment fosters in its pupils. Through these contexts, Edward's Boys have developed a distinctive repertoire of non-textual and non-theatrical practices which directly contribute to the company's performances of early modern drama, and I conclude by suggesting that increasing our awareness of such contexts can greatly enhance our appreciation of the productions to which they give rise.

1 From Prosthetics to Practice: Forming a Company

It is worth beginning by acknowledging the distinctly Shakespearean impetus for the company's founding. In the early 2000s, the historian and broadcaster Michael Wood was preparing a four-part BBC2 series centred on Shakespeare's life and work, titled *In Search of Shakespeare*. Wood's

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examination of Shakespeare's early life, in the second episode titled 'A Time of Revolution', naturally brought him to King Edward VI School, Stratford-upon-Avon's (then all-boy) grammar school which Shakespeare most likely attended. Wood's interest in the school was piqued when he came into contact with Perry Mills, an English teacher and the school's deputy headmaster, who had long been involved with the production of KES's theatricals. At Wood's request, Mills agreed to contribute to the section of the programme which dealt with Shakespeare's education in the classics by rallying some of his pupils to produce a series of short scenes from Elizabethan schoolroom interludes, as well as some of the Latin orations by the wronged women of classical literature that he almost certainly would have studied. The brief scenes featuring the present-day schoolboys repeatedly emphasised their historicity in their attempt to gain access to the educational environment which, according to the series' tidy sweeping narrative, ignited Shakespeare's passion for the theatre. One sequence depicts a boy in a flowing red wig being daubed with red lipstick by one of his peers, while another shows one of the actors being unlaced from an 'authentic' women's gown on loan from the RSC. Despite the ostensible focus on Shakespeare at school, the documentary's use of Shakespeare's young successors gave equal weight to that most tantalising of 'Shakespearean' practices: boys playing women.

It is clear that, for Mills, the success of the enterprise was hampered by the application of period dress and make-up as a means to access the theatrical practice of the past. So much so, in fact, that when *In Search of Shakespeare* aired, entire sequences in which some of the boys dragged up to perform women's laments from Ovid's *Heroides* were cut entirely. In a filmed interview with the theatre historian Carol Chillington Rutter produced several years later, he comments,

> It kind of worked, but it wasn't good enough. There was a boy who was fourteen, who I'd chosen deliberately because he had a bit of acting talent, and I knew he wouldn't be fazed by playing female roles. But in the end the challenge proved too much for him, and it probably proved too much for me as well. It was the first time I'd ever tried to

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