

A Companion to Renaissance Drama edited by Arthur F. Kinney
Chapter 8
The Boy Companies 1599-1613 by Mary Bly

New research is changing the idea that the adult and boy companies were highly competitive rivals.

Boy Company plays are unique not only because of the age of the actors but also because of their content. They were very popular. Their work grew from market pressure.

History

Boy companies were known for comical satire – innovative with dangerous politics.

- 1599 – 1606 Paul's Boys was located in the grounds of St Paul's Cathedral. Led by choir director, Edward Peers. Comical satire that was limited to local, community level. St Paul's was surrounded by Puritans. Their plays are among the most erotically explicit. 1608 – 1610 Peers was bribed to keep the theater closed.
- 1600 – 1608 Queen's Revels (AKA Children of the Queen's Chapel Royal, Children of the Queen's Revels, Children of the Whitefriars) occupied the Blackfriars. Henry Evans leased the Blackfriars from Richard Burbage. Nathaniel Giles & James Robinson worked with him. They had a warrant that allowed them to force boys into the royal choirs. There were 15 lawsuits against them. Adult companies had previously been blocked from performing at the Blackfriars but the noblemen allowed the boy companies to.
- 1607 – 1608 Whitefriars was occupied by a boy company called the King's Revels. Only company to be owned and operated by the playwrights. Driven into bankruptcy by plague closures. This was a notable red-light district. "The fact that the King's Revels repertory has been described as going 'beyond all other companies in the obscenity of its plays' should offer little surprise."
- 1609 – 1613 Queen's Revels moved to the Whitefriars theater and the King's Men (Shakespeare's adult company) took over the Blackfriars.
- 1613 Queen's Revels merged with an adult company.

All three boys companies were within the city of London in liberties that were free from royal and mayoral jurisdiction due to their having originally housed monasteries.

5 Key Characteristics

Erotic Material

Fascination with body parts, body processes (farting), and references to sexual acts are common. The shock of hearing a child tell the dirty joke makes it that much better.

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| 1600 | Queen's Revels actors | age 10 to 14 |
| 1606 | Queen's Revel actor Nathan Field | age 19 and continued to act with them until 25 |
| 1613 | Queen's Revel actor | age 21 |
| 1606 | Children of Paul's becomes the Youths of Paul's | |
| 1607 | King's Revels actor William Barksted | age 17 |

So boy does not necessarily mean child but youth. Prepubescent humor steps from this. Explicit kisses and erotic references are common and not seen in the adult plays.

Homoerotic Material

Boys were seen as having an effeminate type of beauty that near femininity and available. Double cross-dressing meant there were seductive conversations between the male actors. “These plays invoke desire for the male body in a sensually celebratory manner.” The focus of desire in the work of the King's Revels is almost entirely on the male body. This opposes former views that there was no category for 'homosexual' in the 17th century.

Music and Literacy

1600 – 1613 the Queen's Revels used song in 72% of their plays. Dutton claims that the lack of music is one of the reasons that the Paul's boys went out of business. Adult companies also frequently included music. Singing in the royal choirs was the 'day job' of the boy actors.

Satire

They took liberties by making fun of great men's faults even noblemen and kings. As of 1604 the Queen's Revels were approved for performance by their own licenser, playwright Samuel Daniel, rather than by Tilney, the Master of the Revels.

Audiences included aristocrats, gentry, and law students. The audience was closely tied to location. Boy companies also performed their satire at court. Playwrights wrote differently for the different boy companies.

Meta-Theatricality

Boys plays reference the artificial nature of the stage and actors (the beginning of *The Malcontent* and Nell & George in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*). They almost all include a 'disguised' character (Jasper, Malevole). Boys had to use props to assume the role of men (beards) as well as women.

“Jackson Cope argues that the boys' limitations are explicitly turned to comedy during suggestive scenes...” So one argument is that sexual scenes are seen as more comedy than titillation. The author does not agree.

Foreign languages are present in boys plays perhaps to disguise erotic material, as a nod to a learned audience, or to highlight that the actors are schoolboys. The audience's awareness of the actor beneath the character is played with. “The audience's suspension of disbelief.” The audience becomes intimate with the players.