

Shakespeare's Boys: A Cultural History. Katie Knowles.

Palgrave Shakespeare Studies. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. ix + 258 pp. \$90.

After the flurry of scholarship on boys playing women that reshaped the landscape of Shakespeare criticism in the 1990s, it might have seemed that scholars had said everything there was to say about Shakespeare's boys. Katie Knowles's excellent cultural study of boys in Shakespeare's plays proves that wrong. Knowles is part of a larger trend of critics focusing on Shakespeare's children, but what sets her study apart is her interest in Shakespeare's boys as boys and her historical scope. The first part of the book focuses on Shakespeare's child characters in an early modern context, and the second goes on to examine their stage histories in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. By giving the long history of boys in Shakespeare, Knowles enables us to see how shifts in attitudes toward childhood influenced artistic and cultural representations of children.

As Knowles points out, "most of Shakespeare's child characters are boys" (3). As a result, it is easy for studies of childhood in Shakespeare to become de facto studies of boyhood. Knowles's conscious decision specifically to address boyhood highlights the relationship between childhood and gender. She offers an impressively detailed and deep analysis of boy characters that pays attention to their rich variety and to the trends that knit them together. The "noble imps" of her first chapter unite barony and babyhood in ways that are linked to growing up into manhood as an aristocratic youth, while the pages and schoolboys of her third chapter receive training and education specific to their gender. The book does not have a totalizing thesis about the history of boyhood so much as it offers local arguments about the way that portrayals of boys in Shakespeare reflect cultural attitudes.

One drawback of any study that focuses exclusively on Shakespeare is that there is no space to determine how representative Shakespeare is of his time period. In-depth comparisons with other dramatists, such as John Webster or Thomas Middleton, would have given a stronger sense in the first section of the extent to which Shakespeare's boys were typical of the early modern stage, but that would be a different and potentially less original project. Knowles makes deft use of historical context throughout the book, and the second

half of the book makes a particularly strong contribution to Shakespearean stage history, with Knowles using promptbooks to examine the changes made to the various child roles. After an initial period in the Restoration where the murders of child characters proved popular due to a taste for the sensational, productions tended toward eliminating moments like the murder of Macduff's son, which was seen as simply too painful to stage.

Although Knowles focuses explicitly on boys in the plays, scholars of girlhood will find much of interest in her analysis of the practice of girls and young women playing boys in Victorian productions, reversing the early modern practice of boys playing female characters. Knowles suggests that we should not see this practice as an extension of the titillating breeches parts taken on by adult women, but as an extension of gender ideology. Girls were seen as better at provoking pathos, and they had a longer period in which they could forecast youth than young men. According to Knowles, boyhood "had become such an exalted state that it existed as a platonic idea that real boys could only ever imperfectly represent" (152). In contrast, chapter 6, which focuses on the twentieth century and beyond, reveals an anxiety about the dangers children might pose when they appear innocent but are implicated in violence. Knowles rightly notes that the casting of blonde, innocent-looking children capable of violence in Roman Polanski's film version of *Macbeth* and Adrian Noble's 1986 stage production unsettles the association between childhood and innocence. Knowles focuses on class, but given the racial charge of associating bloneness with innocence, future studies might tell us more about how the intersections of race, class, and gender influence perceptions of who counts as an innocent child in Shakespeare's plays and in our world.

JENNIFER HIGGINBOTHAM, *Ohio State University*