

The Edge of Adulthood: Shakespeare and the Enskillment of Child Actors in Elizabethan England

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Child actors were an integral part of Elizabethan drama—both in theatrical productions and in civic entertainments. Children played different roles to adults, but often as a way to increase their performative skill. By playing minor roles in performances—such as pageboys and messengers—children gained exposure to the demands of performance, and became more skilled as performers. This enskillment of child actors was embedded in various productions over the Elizabethan era, and throughout the period, the various techniques used in the enskilling became more sophisticated. This paper will focus on two methods of enskillment—scaffolding and shepherding—and trace their development and use through their appearance at the entertainment performed for Elizabeth in Norwich in 1578, in Marlowe’s *Edward II*, and in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet*. This paper lays the groundwork for future research into boy actors by arguing that the two genres are not divided by the sharp edge that they are routinely seen as having; but rather, that their blurred edges allow us to see the way that they complimented and reinforced each other.