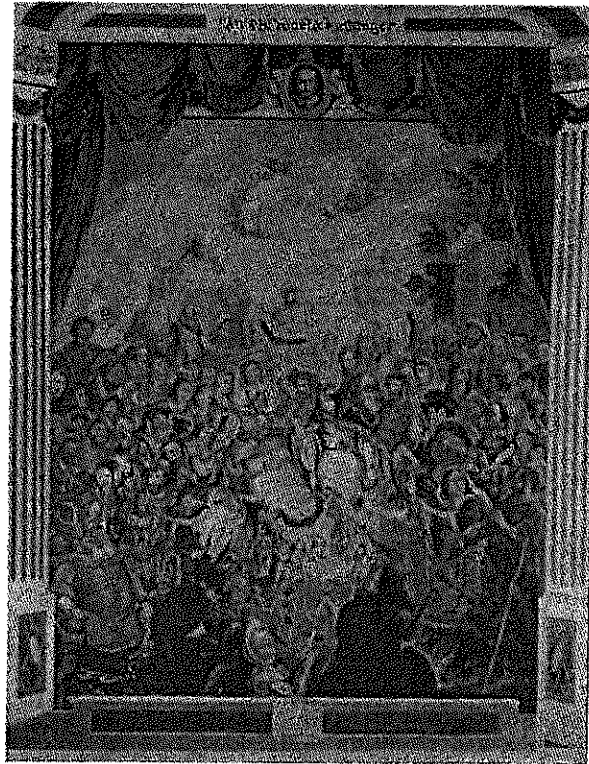


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35. Who's That Boy – Boy Actors and Other Strange Things on the Shakespearean Stage



William Shakespeare gave theatre some of its most famous heroines: Cleopatra, Juliet, Rosalind, Desdemona. But who was playing them on stage in his lifetime? Not female actors, but young boys! Yes, imagine Lady Macbeth with a hint of a moustache or Desdemona with a lower voice, and male actors both playing Romeo and Juliet! But theatre regulations of the time prevented women from acting, writing, producing, or being associated with theatre work in any other way. In fact, if some people in Shakespeare's time had their way, there would be no theatre at all!

Knowing Will Shakespeare

First off, we all know Shakespeare has long been dead. But what do we know about his life? We know, for example, that the man we consider to be Shakespeare might not be the writer of the plays and sonnets we attribute to him. We also know that this man came to

London (many people believe) not to become an actor or a playwright, but because even before he was 21 years old, he was the father of three children, and couldn't afford to look after them anymore! He is one of the very few famous people who is believed to have died on his birthday--April 23--at the age of 52. And if you went to the Library of Congress in Washington, and could read at a miraculous speed of one work about Shakespeare every day, you wouldn't be leaving Washington for twenty years!

Cross-Dressing in Theatre

Getting boys to play women's parts was certainly not Shakespeare's idea. The custom dates from Ancient Greece, and many societies up to Shakespeare's time had similar restrictions on women in theatre, opera and other public performances. Men dressing up as women, or "cross-dressing," as it is called, was therefore a rule in the theatre, not an exception. According to Dr. Aoife Monks from Birkbeck College, University of London, "We do know that cross-dressing is central to early performance and it is one of the few universal theatrical forms. It was and always has been the norm, not abnormal to cross-dress."

A Whole Lot of Angry People!

Frankly, no one knew for sure who all was angry about theatre, and for what reason. They kept changing all the time. We know that two authorities governed theatre: the City of London and the Crown (Queen Elizabeth I for much of Shakespeare's time). One Act of Common Council passed by the City of London in 1574 said that all plays should first be approved by the Mayor. It also said that plays should not be performed on Sundays (for people wouldn't go to church otherwise) or during Lent (when people should not be distracted with entertainment.)

Why were the city authorities so worried? They didn't want people going to the theatres in large numbers. We can imagine that people did go in large numbers, given the fact that this may have been the only form of entertainment open to them. The authorities feared thefts, quarrels, the spread of contagious diseases, young girls having affairs and even the building collapsing! But was anyone listening to them? Not really. It appears that the Queen herself and other members of the aristocracy were fans of theatre, and certainly of our dear Shakespeare. As long as they protected the acting companies, no one could touch them.

Another group that was very upset by theatre was made up of contemporary moralists. Sample this comment from one, John Stockwood: "Will not a filthy play, with the blast of a trumpet, sooner call thither a thousand, than an hour's tolling of a bell, bring to sermon a

hundred?" In other words, Stockwood thought that people would rather see a play than go to church. Many agreed with him.

And just as some of our parents think there is a relation between television, video games, gambling, drugs and sleeping too much, John Northbrooke believed theatre was related to other "vices." He wrote in 1577 "A Treatise wherein Dicing, Dancing, Vain Plays or Enterludes with other Idle Pastimes etc. Commonly Used on Sabbath Day, are Reproved." And Philip Stubbes called playhouses "the chapel of Satan" in his "Anatomy of Abuses" and asked for an immediate and complete abolition of all theatre.

You Can't Wear That!

The most interesting complaint and the most relevant for our discussion on boy actors was about how the actors dressed. Did you know that the Old Testament forbids one sex to wear the clothes of the other? Also, remember that dress was highly codified during this time. "Sumptuary laws," used to control people's expenditure, also applied to clothing. For example, if you were a shopkeeper, you could not wear silver, purple or gold colors. You also couldn't wear fur, foreign wool or velvet. If you were a woman, depending on your rank, you could be forbidden from wearing anything from sleeves and buttons to petticoats! Now imagine what would happen to these laws on the stage. Actors, by no means a respectable class of people at this time, dressed as kings! Men dressed as women! People were so angry that they blamed plays for everything that went wrong at the time: "The cause of plagues is sin: and the cause of sin is plays: therefore the causes of plagues are plays," declared one, Mr. T.W.

Women in the Audience

Was Shakespeare's audience more restricted or less diverse than theatre audiences today? From a butcher to a member of the aristocracy, a tailor to a foreign ambassador, students, lawyers, shopkeepers, everyone went to the theatre. Even those who could not afford to pay for a seat would stand crowded in the pit around the stage. They would whistle and hoot, and throw things at the actors if they were bored! This made the church authorities very angry. People were not going to church, they complained, because they found the plays more entertaining!

Were there any women sitting in the playhouse as these plays were put up? Some scholars believe that women came to watch the play— they could be ladies from the aristocracy, citizens' wives, prostitutes, or even young women masquerading as men. Others believe that they didn't, because the Tudors (the ruling family for much of Shakespeare's time) believed that theatre was a bad influence on women. They wanted women to sit at home, guard their modesty, and not be seen in public at all.

The Boy Actors of Our Times

Now Shakespeare may be long dead, but some of the conventions from his time are with us even to this day. Television has its roots in theatre, and so does film. Remember Robin Williams in *Mrs. Doubtfire*? Dustin Hoffman in *Tootsie*? The tradition of cross-dressing is alive and kicking even today.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What is an example of cross-dressing?

- A) poor men dressing up as rich men
- B) rich men dressing up as poor men
- C) young men dressing up as old men
- D) young men dressing up as women

2. What does the passage describe?

- A) The passage describes Lent and its importance to Christianity.
- B) The passage describes the English aristocracy and what they did at playhouses.
- C) The passage describes Shakespeare and the theatre of his time.
- D) The passage describes the lives of Shakespeare's children.

3. In Shakespeare's time, there was a conflict between the theatre and the church.

What evidence in the passage supports this statement?

- A) Shakespeare is believed to have lived in London and died on his 52nd birthday.
- B) Church authorities complained that people were not going to church because they found plays more entertaining.
- C) The tradition of cross-dressing continues to the present day, as illustrated by *Tootsie* and *Mrs. Doubtfire*.
- D) Cross-dressing was important to early performance and is a theatrical practice in use around the world.

4. What may be one reason that boys played women's parts in the theatre of Shakespeare's time?

- A) Some people of the time believed that theatre was a bad influence on women.
- B) Shopkeepers of the time were not allowed to wear fur, foreign wool, velvet, or the color purple.
- C) People in the audiences of the time included tailors, foreign ambassadors, students, and lawyers.
- D) Contemporary moralists disliked theatre because it kept people from going to church.

5. What is this passage mostly about?

- A) the Library of Congress in Washington and the research of Dr. Aoife Monks at the University of London
- B) the modern cross-dressing of Robin Williams and Dustin Hoffman
- C) Cleopatra, Juliet, Rosalind, Desdemona, and other female characters who appear in Shakespeare's plays
- D) the people who took part in the theatre of Shakespeare's time and the people who opposed it

6. Read this sentence: "William Shakespeare gave theatre some of its most famous heroines: Cleopatra, Juliet, Rosalind, Desdemona. But who was playing them on **stage** in his lifetime? Not female actors, but young boys!"

What does the word "**stage**" mean above?

- A) the main character in a book or play
- B) the place where a play is performed
- C) a country ruled by a king or queen
- D) a person who performs in front of others

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

Boy actors playing women's parts was nothing new in Shakespeare's time; _____, the same thing had been done in Ancient Greece.

- A) previously
- B) currently
- C) later on
- D) most importantly

8. Name one authority that governed theatre in Shakespeare's time.
