

## The Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The 954<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon took place on 11 April 2023 when Dr Harry McCarthy, Junior Research Fellow at Jesus College, University of Cambridge, spoke on *Boying Greatness on Shakespeare's Stage*.

Dr McCarthy began by noting that authors writing about boy actors normally assume that their performances were second best, inferior to those of real women. Some have even suggested that Shakespeare wrote the parts assuming that in the future female roles would be played by women. But were the boys lacking in the skills necessary to play the parts, or have we been looking for the wrong skills?

The term "boy" could apply to males up to their mid-twenties, but boy actors were mostly sixteen or seventeen. Looking at stage directions from plays published during the period he demonstrated how the boys had to be physically active, for instance climbing trees. Commentators described how the boys' supple, graceful and strong "action of body" charmed their audiences. These physical skills enjoyed and expected by playgoers were exactly the same attributes that also attracted criticism from detractors.

Dr McCarthy noted that most attention on Elizabethan education focuses on the learning of Latin, but Richard Mulcaster's *Positions...for the training up of children*, 1581, included chapters on running, fencing, swimming, leaping and other activities.

Stratford's own troupe of boy actors, KES's Edward's Boys, display a vigorous performance style following Mulcaster's strictures. The speaker noted that modern celebration of the physical skills of young men concentrates on their performance on the sports field rather than the theatre.

The Wanamaker Theatre at Shakespeare's Globe now offers an opportunity to examine the plays featuring boy actors. McCarthy's workshop staged scenes including a game of bowls, badminton, and blind man's buff. He concluded that these games were themselves a source of entertainment in which boy actors displayed their physical skills.

He finally asked how these ideas might affect the playing of Shakespeare's most enigmatic female character, Cleopatra. Our doubts say more about our preconceptions than about 17<sup>th</sup> century theatre practice where actors had no time to develop psychological complexity in their roles. Shakespeare gives the actor many opportunities to display physical skills and agility. She is much more active than Antony, assaulting servants, dressing Antony in his armour, and hoisting him from the floor to her monument above the stage. He suggested that in an age where so many worked on ships, manipulating ropes was a necessary skill by which young men demonstrated their strength and agility.

Perhaps, he concluded, theatre performances really were "sport indeed".

This talk was also made available online to members.