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 0521843561 - Children of the Queen's Revels: A Jacobean Theatre Repertory
 Lucy Munro
 Excerpt
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Introduction

Enter PROLOGVE.

PRO. From all that's neere the Court, from all that's great
 Within the compasse of the Citty-wals,
 We now haue brought our Sceane

Enter Citizen [*from audience*].

CIT. Hold your peace good-man boy.

PRO. What do you meane sir?

CIT. That you haue no good meaning: This seuen yeares there haue
 beene playes at this house, I haue obserued it, you haue still
 girds at Citizens; and now you call your play, *The London*
Marchant. Downe with your Title, boy, downe with your
 Title.¹

The light-hearted confrontation staged in the opening scene of Francis Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, first performed around 1607, is typical in many ways of the material dramatised between 1603 and 1613 by the Children of the Queen's Revels. The Queen's Revels was the most enduring and influential of the Jacobean children's companies. Its plays are ambitious and innovative, even avant-garde; its relationship with the audience was informal and, occasionally, combative, with a tendency either to risk confusing spectators with metatheatrical or generic experimentation, or to overstep the bounds of what was considered acceptable in political or social satire. Staging a play like *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, which opens with this striking and potentially baffling metatheatrical intervention, was a risky move, but the Queen's Revels were accustomed to financial, social and political hazard.

After the reestablishment in 1599 of the Children of Paul's, a company that took its boy actors from the ranks of the Cathedral choir school, the Children of the Chapel began to perform at the Blackfriars theatre in 1600. The precise links of the Children of the Chapel with the Chapel Royal have been much disputed, but in 1603, on the accession of James I,

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the company was granted a royal patent and became the Children of the Queen's Revels. Building on the popularity of plays by Ben Jonson and George Chapman, the Queen's Revels commissioned plays from the likes of John Marston – a shareholder in the company – and quickly developed a repertory that intrigued, amused and irritated their original audiences in equal measure. This irritation often spilled into political controversy, and the company lost its royal patent in early 1606; from this date, it seems to have been known as the Children of the Revels. They continued to operate in their Blackfriars theatre until 1608, when serious indiscretions over Chapman's two-part play *The Conspiracy and Tragedy of Charles Duke of Byron* and a lost play about James I's Scottish silver mine led to the company's collapse and the surrender of the playhouse lease to Richard Burbage of the King's Men. Within a year, however, a company led by Queen's Revels shareholder Robert Keyzar was performing at court, and by late 1609 a new 'Children of the Queen's Revels' was in residence at the Whitefriars theatre, where the company remained until finally merging with the Lady Elizabeth's Men in early 1613.²

The appeal of the children's companies is perhaps particularly difficult for modern readers to grasp, more difficult even than the conventional performance of women's parts by boys or young men in the adult companies. This difficulty can be illustrated by a comment in Nicholas Wright's recent play, *Cressida*, in which 'Richard Robinson' – a former boy 'actress' with the King's Men – remarks of a 1630s experiment with children's companies, 'It was a silly idea to start with. Boys playing grown-up men, oh I don't know, there's something funny about it.'³ As this comment highlights, in addition to performing roles with a different gender and, in many cases, social status from their own, the boy actors in children's companies also engaged in a form of age transvestism. It has often been argued that the children's companies must have had an appeal distinct from that of the adults, and an antimimetic acting style based on ironic exaggeration. In many ways, however, the differences between the adult and children's companies have been exaggerated. This is largely because critics have focused on plays performed when the Paul's and Chapel companies were reconstituted in 1599–1600, such as Marston's *Antonio and Mellida* and *Antonio's Revenge* (Paul's, c.1599–1601), and Jonson's *Cynthia's Revels* and *The Poetaster* (Chapel, 1600–1). Some aspects of these plays are tailored to the specific character of the companies when they were first reconstituted – the inductions to *Antonio and Mellida* and *Cynthia's Revels*, for instance, explicitly refer to the bodies of the adolescent actors. In other respects, however, their techniques are

analogous to those employed by the adult companies, for which many of their dramatists also worked, and they can be staged effectively with adult casts.⁴ Moreover, the children's companies' repertories and dramaturgy did not remain static. Many actors stayed with the companies, and as they grew older and more proficient dramatists were able to assume greater versatility from their experienced performers.

Perhaps as a result of this growing virtuosity, together with the employment of self-consciously innovative writers, the repertories performed at the Blackfriars and Whitefriars theatres in the years 1603–8 and 1609–13 constitute the most consistently fascinating body of drama staged in this period, notwithstanding the King's Men's catalogue of plays by Shakespeare and, later, by Beaumont and Fletcher. The Queen's Revels is often said to have produced mainly 'railing' plays; like Beaumont's *Citizen*, some critics have assumed that the purpose of the company was to 'haue still girds at Citizens', while others have detected jibes against crown and court.⁵ In fact, the Queen's Revels plays demonstrate a much greater range than the satiric stereotype might suggest. With the exception of the chronicle history play, they encompass every significant early Jacobean narrative mode: the disguised ruler play (*The Malcontent*, *The Fawn*, *The Fleeer*), city comedy (*Eastward Ho*, *The Dutch Courtesan*, *Your Five Gallants*, *A Woman is a Weathercock*), revenge tragedy (*The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois*, *Cupid's Revenge*), political tragedy (*The Conspiracy and Tragedy of Charles Duke of Byron*) and travel drama (*A Christian Turned Turk*). Many of their works are strikingly experimental, even iconoclastic: heroic tragedy in *Bussy D'Ambois*; metadramatic excesses in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*; inventive music and spectacle in *Sophonisba*; ironic pastoral in *The Faithful Shepherdess*; stark misanthropy in *Epicoene*.

In concentrating on a single repertory, and asserting the importance of that model for the criticism of early modern drama, my approach in this book is indebted to the recent work of Mary Bly, Andrew Gurr, Roslyn Lander Knutson, and Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean.⁶ The organisation of theatre history by company recurred throughout the twentieth century – E. K. Chambers's *The Elizabethan Stage* (1923), G. E. Bentley's *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage* (1941–68) and Andrew Gurr's *The Shakespearian Playing Companies* (1996) each included narrative accounts of theatre companies – and studies of the children's companies were published by H. N. Hillebrand, Michael Shapiro and Reavley Gair.⁷ Recently, however, it has become an increasingly attractive option for literary critics, due, at least in part, to the influence of post-structuralist uncertainty regarding the place of the author. We are

recognising that, as Jacques Derrida suggests in *Of Grammatology*, 'the writer writes *in* a language and *in* a logic whose proper systems, laws and life his discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely. He uses them only by letting himself, after a fashion and up to a point, be governed by the system.'⁸ The author is a useful organising principle, but it is not the only one available. Michel Foucault argues that 'since the eighteenth century, the author has played the role of the regulator of the fictive'; to a large extent, the main 'regulator of the fictive' in the early modern playhouse was the playing company, not the author.⁹ As the material summarised by Bentley in *The Profession of Dramatist in Shakespeare's Time* suggests, companies purchased plays from dramatists – sometimes buying a complete script, more often paying in installments after discussions over an idea, a plot or a completed act – and had near-complete control over those plays' progress to the stage.¹⁰ Plays seem to have been produced through the cooperation of playwrights and companies, as seen in Dekker's testimony in Star Chamber in 1624 that he and other dramatists were 'making & contriuing [. . .] [a] play called keep the widow waking and did make & contrive the same vppon the instructions giuen them by one Raph Savage [the Red Bull company's agent]'.¹¹

Approaching plays through the company for which they were written is a way of acknowledging the compromises which writers make when they engage with institutions such as the early modern theatre industry. It is not, however, a question of denying the playwright's agency, but of considering the input of all those involved in the production and dissemination of plays: dramatists, actors, shareholders, playhouse functionaries, patrons, audiences and publishers. In focusing on the contexts in which plays were originally produced, this book is, to a certain extent, in thrall to what Walter Benjamin rather unpleasantly dubbed 'the whore called "Once upon a time" in historicism's bordello'.¹² A repertory approach is, however, offered more as a theoretical construct than as a historicist imperative. Furthermore, although I have concentrated on the repertory in which these plays were, in the main part, originally performed, I have included in the text and notes references to recent productions of the plays, a reminder that the 'meaning' of a play is located not only in the circumstances of its first production, but also in later performances and appropriations.

This book is therefore a response to McMillin and MacLean's suggestion that company repertories should be studied 'with the kinds of critical and textual attention that are normally reserved for the canons of the playwrights'.¹³ A multiplicity of approaches is envisaged, whereby canons

associated with theatre history are opened up to the full range of available critical and textual models. The closest analogue to what I attempt here is Bly's recent book *Queer Virgins and Virgin Queens on the Early Modern Stage*, a study of 'Whitefriars puns, the men who wrote the puns, the plays in which they appear, and the audience for those puns' (2–3). Like Bly, I attempt to bring into play all the currently available data about the company and its personnel. Chapter One, 'Raiding the nest: a company biography', explores the potential and problems inherent in the idea of a 'company biography'. I first provide an overview of the activities of the Children of the Chapel and the Children of the Queen's Revels in the years 1600–13, then turn to a detailed analysis of what is known about the Queen's Revels personnel and their input into the production of plays at the Blackfriars and Whitefriars theatres. A model of collaborative authority over dramatic production – on which I draw in the following chapters – is established through examination of the various roles of dramatists, shareholders, patrons, associates, actors and publishers.

In *Queer Virgins* Bly melds a close linguistic analysis, informed by queer theory, with equally close attention to the circumstances in which the plays were written and performed. Such a concentrated critical model could, however, constrain a study of the Queen's Revels repertory. The King's Revels company was in existence only in the plague-disrupted seasons of 1607–8; the extant repertory is remarkably homogenous, being the product of one specific literary moment and of a small group of dramatists whose extant plays are highly collaborative.¹⁴ The plays of the Queen's Revels, produced by a larger group of dramatists over a longer period of time, demand a more flexible approach or series of approaches. In order to take this diversity into account, and to avoid the potentially reductive format of the chronological survey, I structure my reevaluation of the Queen's Revels repertory by genre, looking in turn at three broad structural genres or 'kinds': comedy, tragicomedy and tragedy.¹⁵ Taking a fresh look at genre need not mean returning to a historically deracinated or simplistically formalist approach: to appropriate Ben Jonson's term, we should not be confined by 'the niceness of a few (who are nothing but Forme)'.¹⁶ Categorising plays by means of their genre was integral to the dramatic process; it thus provides us with a historically grounded perspective on the collaborative production of plays and an interpretative link between their production and reception.¹⁷

The importance of generic categories can be seen at all stages in the production of drama in the commercial theatre, from the commissioning and writing of plays through to their performance, reception and afterlife

in print. In Philip Henslowe's account book or *Diary*, for instance, generic categories seem to be as everyday and concrete as the props and properties alongside which they are catalogued:

Lent vnto John ducke to paye for
 the tvrckes head & ij wemens gownes
 mackenge & fresh watr for owld castell }³li s
 & the merser bill & harey chettell in
 eareneste of a tragedie called
 y^e 24 of aguste 1602

Lent vnto xpofer beston & Robart palante the
 26 of nov{e}mb{er} 1602 to paye vnto John day to m^r smythe }^{xxxx}s
 m^r hathway & the oth^er poete in p{ar}te of payment
 of the playe called [John dayes com^ody] the some of
 the blacke doge of newgate¹⁸

Judging by Henslowe's *Diary*, generic categories were used as shorthand for the kinds of plays required, communicating mutually understood requirements regarding subject matter, narrative structure, dramatic language and characterisation. In the second extract a title has eventually been interlined below; in the first, space was left for a title that was never entered. Usually the categories are simple, with repeated references to comedies and tragedies, but they are occasionally more complex: an entry in George Chapman's hand, dated 17 July 1599, notes that he has received part payment for 'a Pastorall ending in a Tragedye'.¹⁹

At the other end of the play's life, fixed generic categories came back into use in the shape of generic tags on printed title-pages, which were also used for advertising.²⁰ The wording of these title-pages demonstrates the extent to which knowledge of generic terms was assumed by those who marketed and printed drama: 'AL | FOYLES | A | Comedy, Presented at the Black | Fryers, And lately before | his Maiestie. | Written by *George Chapman*'; 'THE | VVONDER | of VVomen | Or | *The Tragedie of Sophonisba*, | as it hath beene sundry times Acted | at the *Blacke Friers*. | Written by IOHN MARSTON'; 'POËTASTER, | OR | His Arraignment. | *A Comicall Satyre*. | Acted, in the yeere 1601. By the then | Children of Queene ELIZABETHS | CHAPPEL. | The Author B. I.'; 'The Deuils Law-case. | OR, | When Women goe to Law, the | Deuill is full of Businesse. | *A new Tragedycomædy*. [. . .] As it was approouedly well Acted | by her Maiesties Seruants. | *Written by IOHN WEBSTER*'.²¹ Where a play's genre is provided, it is usually more prominent than either company or author; companies tend to take precedence over authors.²²

Generic terms were also employed in prologues and inductions – the first parts of a play to be encountered by the theatre audience.²³ Early modern drama was performed in repertory, with large gaps between performances of any single play; a play that was unsuccessful at its first performance could easily be dropped. Emphasis on a play's genre is often associated, therefore, with the need for a play to be accepted on its very first performance; to a large extent, its success could depend on the success with which the audience 'read' its genre. For this reason prologues frequently couple references to genre with pleas for a play's gentle reception by the audience. The prologue to Jonson's *Volpone* (King's Men, 1605), for example, states that the writer 'presents quick Comœdy, refined, | As best Criticks haue designed', hoping to ally the audience with the judgement of these 'best Criticks'.²⁴ Similarly, in the prefatory address 'To the Reader' in his innovative 'pastorall Tragic-comedie', *The Faithful Shepherdess* (Queen's Revels, c.1608), Fletcher regrets not having defined its genre in the theatre. 'If you be not reasonably assurde of your knowledge in this kinde of Poeme', he writes, 'lay downe the booke or read this, which I would wish had bene the prologue.'²⁵ The play failed on its first performance and may not have been performed again before it appeared in print, judging by Beaumont's reference to this 'second publication' in a dedicatory verse.²⁶ Fletcher therefore implies that he believes the play might have succeeded if he had prepared its original audience properly.

Jonson and Fletcher suggest the utility of fixed generic categories in the battle between audiences' expectations and dramatists' intentions or company policy. Elsewhere, however, the picture is a little more complicated. The title-page of John Day's *The Isle of Gulls* (Queen's Revels, 1606) contains no generic terms. This does not mean, however, that no interest is shown in the play's form. In its metadramatic induction, the Prologue is forced to negotiate with three 'Gentlemen'. These fictional playgoers are part of the select group found only in indoor theatres such as the Blackfriars, who would sit on stools placed on the edge of the stage itself, thereby crossing the boundary between spectator and spectacle. Taking advantage of their proximity to the company's representative, each gentleman demands to see a different kind of play. The first demands vicious satire: 'ist any thing Criticall?', he asks, 'Are Lawyers fees, and Cittizens wiues laid open in it: I loue to heare vice anatomized, & abuse let blood in the maister vaine, is there any great mans life charactred int?'²⁷ When told that 'only in the person of *Dametas*' will vices be expressed, he declares, 'All thats nothing to mee, and there be not Wormewood water and

Copperes int, Ile not like it, should *Apollo* write it, and *Rosius* himselfe act it' (A2v; Induction, 57, 62–4). The second gentleman demands 'a sceane of venery, that will make a mans spirrits stand on theyr typtoes, and die his blood in a deepe scarlet', and the third 'a stately pend historie, as thus, *The rugged windes, with rude and ragged ruffes. &c*' (A2v; Induction, 68–70, 77–9). Their demands eventually lead the exasperated Prologue to ask,

Alas Gentlemen, how ist possible to content you? you will haue rayling, and inuectiues, which our Authour neither dares, nor affects: you baudy and scurrill iests, which neither becomes his modestie to write, nor the eare of a generous Auditory to heare: you must ha swelling comparisons, and bumbast Epithites, which are as fit for the body of a Comedie, as *Hercules* shooe for the foote of a Pygmy: yet all these we must haue, and all in one play, or tis alreadie condemned to the hell of eternall disgrace. (A2v–A3r; Induction, 83–92)

The Prologue uses three arguments in an attempt to limit the audience's right to demand what the play should be like: the inclination of the playwright, the taste of the rest of the audience, and the generic indecorum of introducing the wrong kind of discourse into a comedy. The appeal to indecorum caps his protest; the combination of demands would, in his eyes, result in incoherence. The Prologue begs the gentlemen to embrace the play and its generic character, and thereby to accept and approve it; the gentlemen, however, remain obstinate:

- 1 Looke toot, if there be not gall int, it shall not passe.
- 2 If it be not baudie, tis impossible to passe.
- 3 If it be both Criticall and baudy, if it be not high written,
 both your Poet and the house to, loose a friend of me. (A3r; Induction, 93–8)

In the comment that both the dramatist and the playhouse lose out if their play is rejected, the induction reasserts the necessary collaboration between individual members of the company and between the company and the audience. Ironically, of course, the play capably mixes all three contradictory modes – its playful adaptation of Sidney's *Arcadia* is simultaneously satiric, bawdy and high-blown – triumphantly confounding its audience's expectations and calling into question the kinds of mutually exclusive generic categories that the induction invokes.

Conceptions of genre in the early modern theatre seem to have been a peculiar mixture of the set and the fluid. Those involved with the production of dramatic texts were acutely aware of genres and generic categorisation, but approached them in a highly flexible manner. If the play's audience or readers were thought to need guidance, a generic

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definition would be provided, usually presented in neo-classical terms or as if it had literary authority. Such definitions were rarely adhered to within plays, however, and playwrights and companies often portrayed themselves as rejecting genre altogether when particular categories became outmoded or politically dangerous. The prologue to *The Woman Hater* remarks of its author,

*he that made this Play, meanes to please Auditors so, as hee may bee an Auditor himselfe hereafter, and not purchase them with the deare losse of his eares: I dare not call it Comedie, or Tragedie; 'tis perfectly neyther: A Play it is, which was meant to make you laugh, how it will please you, is not written in my part[.]*²⁸

The Woman Hater was first performed by the Children of Paul's in 1606, and the reference to the 'deare losse of his eares' may be an allusion to the political controversy aroused by the Children of the Queen's Revels. The tragic *Philotas* and the comic *Eastward Ho* and *The Isle of Gulls* all displeased the authorities; Jonson later commented that Chapman, Marston and himself, as the writers of *Eastward Ho*, were in danger of having 'their ears cutt & noses'.²⁹ The prologue is, moreover, eager to tell the audience they will not find in this play 'the ordinarie and ouer-worne trade of ieausting at Lordes and Courtiers, and Citizens, without taxation of any particular or new vice by them found out, but at the persons of them' (A2v; lines 19–21). The play's protested political neutrality is embodied in its refusal to participate in the potentially dangerous genres of comedy and tragedy, and in its (stated) refusal to engage with the kind of satiric material demanded by the fictional spectator in *The Isle of Gulls*. The refusal to write a play according to a previously defined genre or popular mode – or, rather, the refusal to *admit* to having done so – is politically, rather than artistically, motivated.

Reactions of audiences towards generic signifiers also seem to have been variable: spectators might, for instance, criticise a play for not conforming with neo-classical rules, or demand that comic material or tragic language be inserted into plays for which companies and dramatists thought it unsuited. Because early modern theatre companies were dependent on their audiences, they were concerned with keeping the attention and approval of disparate groups of people with different ideas about what constituted a particular genre and whether generic decorum should be kept. In addition, the rapid turnover of plays in a repertory system meant that most plays were adaptations, material being taken from many different sources. These conditions meant that the forms of plays were constantly mutating, and the boundaries between dramatic

genres constantly shifted with the introduction of fresh sources and influences.

This model of genre has most in common with the theoretical perspective outlined in Derrida's important essay 'The Law of Genre'. Derrida argues that even though there may be a 'law of genre' – a prohibition against miscegenation that can be either a prediction ('it will happen thus. I will not mix genres') or a 'sharp order' – it is accompanied by a counter-law or 'law of the law of genre', a 'principle of contamination'.³⁰ At the instant when a text is identified as belonging to a specific genre, the genre itself is altered; the text simultaneously belongs and does not belong to that genre. These 'laws' are not presented as alternative ways of viewing a text; they are instead bound together. 'Every text participates in one or several genres', Derrida writes:

there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging. And not because of an abundant overflowing or a free anarchic and unclassifiable productivity, but because of the *trait* of participation itself, because of the effect of the code and of the generic mark. In marking itself generically, a text demarcates itself. (65)

Although the post-structuralist 'text' is often historically and politically deracinated, Derrida's formulation – in particular the idea of generic participation without belonging – is a useful tool in analysing the function of generic conventions in the early modern theatre industry. Theatrical modes need to be seen not as monolithic entities with sets of clearly defined and mutually exclusive characteristics, but as unstable networks of generic signifiers understood by producers and audiences. The signifiers are themselves the product of commonly held perspectives and inherited ideas, and are constantly subject to change as those ideas and perspectives change. At any one time a play's genre can be influenced by factors such as the opinions of its author, the strategies of its playing company or the demands of its audience. Each new work is a negotiation between an inherited form and current ideas and fashions, and with each new work the genres in which it participates are reconfigured and their ideological associations are adjusted. Thus a structural genre such as comedy or tragedy can seem static or archetypal, but it is in fact continually modulating and its boundaries shifting.

In looking at a major structural genre, each chapter also draws on a different range of critical, theoretical and textual approaches. Chapter Two, "Proper gallants wordes": comedy and the theatre audience', revisits the much-debated problem of the nature and outlook of the early