

Bridget Anderson  
SAA 2026: Abstract  
Seminar: Child Performance  
12.15.25

**Title:** “Practised Cleopatra in Her Captivity”: *The Concealed Fancies* on the Cusp of Adulthood

**Abstract:**

*The Concealed Fancies*, the manuscript comedy written by sisters Jane Cavendish and Elizabeth Cavendish Brackley around 1645, is long appreciated as a piece of early modern women’s writing and a glimpse into women’s reactions to the English Civil War. I propose a reexamination of the play, not only written but also likely performed by the two sisters, as a space of child performance. This paper situates *The Concealed Fancies* in the lives of its authors at the cusp of their transition from childhood to adulthood amidst the tumult of the Civil War. I collate historical methods and literary analysis to consider the Cavendish sisters’ biographies alongside their own writing. For instance, Elizabeth was married when she collaborated with her sister on this play, but was not permitted to live with her husband yet, as she was considered too young (still a child) by her family.

The play is an energetic and earnest discussion of the benefits and dangers of marriage by young women who have not yet real life experience. *Concealed Fancies* culminates in an exchange between the sisters, through the voices of their characters, correcting and counseling their father in a tone of children who still view their father as their primary priority but have the maturity to speak frankly to him about his lapses in judgment. This paper advocates to expand the study of child performance to include work by “children” in their late teenage years and plays depicting the transition between childhood and adulthood.

Dr. Benjamin S. Reed

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln

**SAA 2026 Abstract**

“He Straight Declined”: Reading Mamillius’s Death as Tragic Protest in *The Winter’s Tale*

Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* is a complex play for many reasons, but perhaps its most vexing element for audiences and scholars alike is the death of Leontes’s young son Mamillius in Act 2. As the king defames and humiliates Hermione, the prince is separated from his mother and dies shortly afterwards. While the play speculates that the child’s death results either from shame or divine punishment, I argue that Mamillius intentionally wastes away in protest of his tyrannical father. This paper considers the role of children as social agents and how they resist and disrupt systems of adult power. Because Mamillius is a child, he is unlike Shakespeare’s adult tragic heroes who avenge themselves by enacting violence against their abusers. Nevertheless, the prince reaches a similar tragic end by taking his own life, albeit through passive acts of self-starvation and sleep deprivation. By reading Mamillius’s death as a suicide rather than resulting from circumstances beyond his control, he becomes a more agential and meaningful character who drives the plot by condemning his father’s unjust rule. With this alternate reading in mind, I consider how modern performances of *The Winter’s Tale* often double Mamillius with Perdita or have him return as a ghost symbolizing forgiveness for Leontes. While I understand the rationale for these choices offering conveniences for productions or comfort for the perturbed audience respectively, I argue both risk downplaying the tragedy of Mamillius’s “tale” and robbing him of agency.

Training Up the Boys: Character Types, Terentian Contrasts, and John Lyly's Repertory of Comedies for the Children of Paul's Troupe

Jeanne H. McCarthy

Georgia Gwinnett College

As the editor Leah Scragg observes, John Lyly's plays for the Children of Paul's "create a type of exquisite, otherworldly drama, seemingly remote in its self-conscious artifice from the politically charged realities of the [elite court] environment for which the plays were ultimately designed." Artistically refined works flattering a Queen--in which classical settings denaturalize social constructs and, while introducing a mesmerizing fluidity, enable a reframing and embrace of otherwise forbidden desire--is thus one way to describe Lyly's drama and children's performances generally. While such an assessment makes sense of the drama's Ovidian and pastoral origins, it nonetheless risks relegating the performance tradition to a merely art-for-art's sake escapist irrelevance, lulling readers into paying too little attention to its real-world impacts drawn from the tradition's Terentian influences, something I wish to address here with a particular focus on *Galatea* and *Mother Bombie*. When considered in terms of the early modern school training in Terentian comedy offered in early grammars, Quintilian's instructions on oratory, and Erasmus' recommendations for teaching literary analysis, the school's novel approach to characterization in an era of adult professionalization becomes apparent. The ability to mimic and identify distinct characteristics is one key feature of the training, something that draws notice during the Marprelate controversy with the warning to some to avoid Lyly's notice or risk having "Some One of his Apes hired, to make a Playe of you." Lyly's boys' immersion in Terence would significantly alter notions of character and plot that unleashed Shakespeare's later advances.

**A Transgender Craze Seducing Our Ladies: “Tender Age” and Racial Plasticity in *A Maske Presented at Ludlow Castle***

HARRY R. MCCARTHY

University of Southern California

This paper will attend to the performing child at the heart of Milton’s *A Maske Presented at Ludlow Castle* (1634), the fourteen-year-old Lady Alice Egerton. I offer a refreshed reading of *A Maske* which locates what David Getsy terms “transgender capacity” in its centralization of the body of the Lady who is framed throughout as both astoundingly white but also concerningly malleable and open to transformation. I trace how the Lady’s journey through the masque, and her interactions with the darkened and charismatically gender-nonconforming Comus, makes visible gender’s mutability, including the production of cisness as itself a series of ongoing negotiations and manipulations. In line with one of the central insights of trans studies writ large, I additionally highlight how the solidification of cisness—emblemized at the masque’s conclusion by the Lady’s rescue and return—is an inherently racialized project. Through a trans reading, I ultimately argue, *A Maske Presented at Ludlow Castle* emerges as being intensely concerned with youthful vulnerability to gendered transformation which is intimately bound up in the solidification of racial categories. The paper shares some preliminary thinking for my monograph-in-progress, *Early Modern Childhood and the Engendering of Difference*.

Aidan Selmer  
SAA 2026 Abstract

**Title:** “Our Muse is Homespun, Our Action is Our Own”: Skill and Schoolcraft in *Cupid’s Banishment*

**Abstract:** In 1617, the students of the Ladies’ Hall at Deptford, an aristocratic girls’ finishing school, performed Robert White’s *Cupid’s Banishment* before Queen Anne. Several factors mark White’s masque out as unique to the form, including the performance of “Mrs Ann Watkins” in the speaking role of Fortune, and its affirmation of Queen Anne, rather than James I, as its highest personal and political witness. These elements, with good reason, have led scholars to focus on *Cupid’s Banishment’s* place within the history of the masque: Lauren Shohet traces its influence on Ben Jonson’s *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* (1618), while Clare McManus evaluates its reflection of the social dynamics of Queen Anne’s court. This essay seeks to build on these studies by exploring the nature of children’s performance in *Cupid’s Banishment*. Much like plays for the popular stage, *Cupid’s Banishment* presents students of the Ladies’ Hall in roles that demonstrate their acquisition of various skills—here, these include dance, singing, and embroidery. Additionally, however, each performance of skill reimagines a traditional statement on gender hierarchy, such as using figured dance to spell the letters of Queen Anne’s name before that of James I, and performing a song that transforms the myth of Philomela into a celebration of unconquered chastity. Accordingly, this essay argues that *Cupid’s Banishment* not only treats children’s performance as an occasion to show students’ learned proficiencies, but also invests that performance with the potential to revise attitudes toward gender conventional to the society they were entering.

## Shakespeare’s Puppet Children

Nicole Sheriko

Contemporary productions of Shakespeare’s plays often rely on puppets to play the parts of children. This strategy radically departs from early modern plays’ reliance on child actors while still invoking the strong associations between child actors and puppets in the early modern imagination. Such associations are often negative—puppets and children are small, manipulable, not human—rhetoric that is sometimes outright wrong and downplays the tremendous contributions of both child actors and puppets to early modern performance culture. This essay brings together practical and conceptual links between puppetry and children across early modern and contemporary performances of Shakespeare. I ask what contemporary puppets playing children can illuminate about child characters in Shakespeare. Productions by the Royal Shakespeare Company, at Shakespeare’s Globe, and at the American Shakespeare Center showcase how contemporary performance uses puppetry to replace child actors (like Mamillius in *The Winter’s Tale*) and to physically manifest child characters that never appear on stage in the original plays (like the changeling boy in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*). In these two plays especially, what is gained and lost by performing an objectified child as a literal object? Drawing on archival production photographs and some surviving puppets, I aim to tease out the stakes of this spectacular interchangeability of child and object for Shakespeare’s plays and how we stage them now.

Child Performance  
SAA 2026

**Feeling Trans in the Trans Renaissance: *The Maid's Metamorphosis* and the Child Actor**

Jordan Windholz  
Shippensburg University

Performed by the Children of Paul's, *The Maid's Metamorphosis* presents a story of double gender transformation. The maid Eurymine transforms by the grant of Apollo into Eurymine the man, and then Eurymine the man transforms again into the princess Atlanta. Insofar as scholarship has attended to the play, it has focused on the ways the gender transformations that feature in its plot can serve as evidence about the bodies and the performances of its child actors. That is to say, scholars have tended to examine the play as a means of interpreting the "boy actors," as well as their "boyness," to extrapolate early modern concepts of gender nonconformity, among other things. Conceiving of these readings as symptomatic of a cis preoccupation of theorizing gender on and through the child actor's body, I want to consider instead how the play presents the child (and perhaps the child actor) as the agent of realizing their gender by, in particular, dramatizing *what it feels like* to have a gender into which one transitions. I argue, ultimately, that the play provides a way not primarily to think about trans embodiment but trans affect, that it negotiates what it feels like to feel trans in the trans renaissance.