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Naughty Instruments: Children's Song in *Epicoene*

Early modern English children's companies raise the question of how a body becomes an instrument – channeling and re-sounding a source or script. Perceived as spontaneous, without the adult capacity for deliberation and self-control, children mimicked – and also disturbed – their scripts.¹ They were seen as commodities to be acquired and traded, as well as innocent conduits for the intentions of playwrights and companies. Yet children also complicated and distracted from the fictions they enacted, not least because their ambiguously gendered bodies were a source of erotic, even lurid attention.² As Jonson's *Epicoene* dramatizes in a uniquely explicit manner, a child actor could displace its role, fixating attention on the performative body and remaking the audience's experience of theatrical mimesis.

The child's singing body could be an especially disorienting instrument. Children's song often connected less to the immediate plot than to a tune from church, court, street, or the lengthy entre-act concerts of the indoor theater. Singing children, furthermore, often lacked a discernible role in the fiction and tantalized audiences with forbidden or peripheral associations like that of Clerimont's page and "ingle" (catamite or sexual plaything) who appears at the beginning of *Epicoene*. Clerimont's page recalls how Lady Haughty and other women have groped and "sponge[d]" him, then re-performs the scintillating song to which Clerimont was denied access. Singing that "art's hid causes are not found," the page acts as an vehicle for his master's enjoyment by re-membering a prior erotic episode and re-enacting what he calls the "adulteries of art." This moment asks us to consider the ways in which children's song offers a dispersal and attenuation of embodiment outside individual performative acts, across plays, and beyond immediate experience.

¹ See Michael Witmore, *Pretty Creatures: Children and Fiction in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007); Claire M. Busse, "'Pretty Fictions and 'Little Stories,'" in *Childhood and Children's Books in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Andrea Immel and Michael Witmore (New York: Routledge, 2006), 75-102; and Blaine Greteman, "Coming of Age on Stage: Jonson's *Epicoene* and the Politics of Childhood in Early Stuart England," *ELH* 79, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 135-60.

² This is true not only of children's companies: think, for example, of the eroticized corpse of Shakespeare's Juliet.