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Killing Shakespeare's Children: The Cases of *Richard III* and *King John*

Joseph Campana

This essay explores a series of affective, sexual and temporal disturbances that Shakespeare's child characters create on the early modern stage and that lead these characters often to their deaths. It does so by turning to the murdered princes of *Richard III* and the ultimately extinguished boy-king Arthur of *King John*. A pervasive sentimentality about childhood shapes the way audiences and critics have responded to Shakespeare's children by rendering invisible complex and discomfiting erotic and emotional investments in childhood innocence. While *Richard III* subjects such sentimentality to its analytic gaze, *King John* explores extreme modes of affect and sexuality associated with childhood. For all of the pragmatic political reasons to kill Arthur, he is much more than an inconvenient dynastic obstacle. Arthur functions as the central node of networks of seduction, the catalyst of morbid displays of affect, and the signifier of future promise as threateningly mutable. *King John* and *Richard III* typify Shakespeare's larger dramatic interrogation of emergent notions of childhood and of contradictory notions of temporality, an interrogation conducted by the staging of uncanny, precocious, and ill-fated child roles.

Keywords Children; childhood; seduction; sexuality; affect; temporality; *Richard III*; *King John*

If it is fair to say that Shakespeare included in his plays more child roles than did his contemporaries (Ann Blake counts thirty; Mark Heberle counts thirty-nine), it is also fair to say Shakespeare provided a wide range of parts for those children: from pivotal roles in royal succession to trace presences as enigmatic markers of symbolic equations never perhaps to be solved. While some of these children play predictable roles as messengers, dutiful sons and daughters, or mute ornamentation, many are subject to manipulation, minimization, erasure, or murder: the elusively absent presence of the changeling boy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*,

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around which much of the play's action appears to revolve; the mystifying off-stage death of Mamillius in *The Winter's Tale*; the equally mystifying leap of Arthur (from a castle wall) to freedom, which results in his death, in *King John*; the murder of the precocious princes in *Richard III* and the threatened infanticides of *Henry V*; the regendering of the child of *Henry VIII*, announced, at first, as a son but then revealed to be the glorious Elizabeth; the introduction of the enigmatic children of *Titus Andronicus*'s Lucius and Aaron, aggressively foregrounded in Julie Taymor's film *Titus*. Marjorie Garber remarks in *Coming of Age in Shakespeare* that the "disconcertingly solemn and prematurely adult" Shakespearean child "strikes the audience with its oddness, and we are relieved when these terrible infants leave the stage. We may feel it to be no accident that almost all go to their deaths" (30). When we consider not merely child roles but also the *adult* children whose conditions of birth or parentage render them prone to death, misfortune, sedition and murder, even a cursory list of Shakespeare's troubled children grows considerably: Lear's daughters, Gloucester's sons, Richard of Gloucester, Richard of Gloucester's relatives in the line of succession, twenty-five of *Titus Andronicus*' twenty-six children, Coriolanus and his son, Miranda, Perdita, Imogen and Marina.

This essay explores a series of affective, sexual and temporal disturbances that Shakespeare's children create on the early modern stage and that lead these children to their grim fates. It does so by turning to the murdered princes of *Richard III* and the ultimately extinguished boy-king Arthur of *King John*. A pervasive sentimentality about children, one relatively new to early modernity if thoroughly instantiated in the present day, shapes the way audiences and critics have responded to Shakespeare children by rendering invisible complex and often discomfiting erotic and emotional investments in childhood innocence. As we will see, *Richard III* subjects such sentimentality to its analytic gaze, juxtaposing Richard's indifference to the age of his victims (who, like his brother Clarence, are merely obstacles to the throne) with an intense public sensitivity to the death of these "innocents" that transforms them into objects whose beauty both confirms Richard's evil and retains the loss of these children and the future they might represent as desirable, enjoyable commodities. Having exposed the parameters of sentimentality in *Richard III*, Shakespeare continues in *King John* to explore extreme modes of affect and sexuality associated with childhood. For all of the pragmatic political reasons to kill Arthur, his role in the play exceeds that of an inconvenient dynastic obstacle to the machinations of his usurping uncle. Instead, Arthur functions as the central node of networks of seduction, the catalyst of morbid displays of affect, and the signifier of future promise as threateningly mutable. The redefinition of future promise in *King John* as dangerously unpredictable helps us consider how Shakespeare interrogates emergent notions of childhood and how he then explores shifting and often contradictory conceptions of temporality associated with those uncanny, precocious, and often ill-fated children.

To say the least, then, children are a problem for Shakespeare, a problem of growing interest to critics. Carol Chillington Rutter's recent readings

of *Titus Andronicus* (and Julie Taymor's *Titus*) and *Macbeth*, including an introduction to the latest Penguin edition of the latter, place a war against children, and the particular future they represent, at the heart of any interpretation of those plays' "anatomy of fear" (Introduction xxi).¹ Despite slackening interest in the cross-dressing of boy actors of the early modern stage, the study of the significance and legacy of child players, child companies and the repertoire of plays with which they were associated has come under greater scrutiny, as in Lucy Munro's *Children of the Queen's Revels*, which supplements earlier studies by Harold Newcomb Hillebrand, Michael Shapiro, and Joy Leslie Gibson. Recent and upcoming conferences, conference sessions, special issues and edited collections confirm the initial swells of a new wave of work on early modern children and Shakespearean childhood. Traditionally, however, the attention paid to Shakespeare's children ranges from scant to predictable. Cleanth Brooks's seminal "The Naked Babe and the Cloak of Manliness" famously countered L. C. Knights's "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth" on the very matter of the significance of children, which anchors Knights's dismissive account of Shakespeare critics all too keen to speculate beyond the boundaries of the text. Brooks examines instead the limits of metaphor, seeing children as ideal test cases and not only representations of the future but also representations of the soft, vulnerable humanity opposed to murderous masculinity in *Macbeth*. Though Brooks opened up new avenues of inquiry into the uses of metaphor in Shakespeare, he also enshrined a sentimental notion of childhood that was to become a lasting part of Shakespeare studies.

Critics still tend to find in Shakespeare's children exactly those qualities predictably associated with childhood: innocence, purity, helplessness, speechlessness and glorious future promise. Ann Blake sees Shakespeare's children "as victims... in need of protection from adult wickedness" ("Children and Suffering" 293, 295); "perfect innocence", Blake remarks, "is only possible in children" ("Children and Suffering" 301). Mark Heberle finds in those children an innocence in need of nurture, claiming that

Shakespeare graphically pays homage to both the potential and the integrity of childhood and suggests that protecting, nurturing and assisting the child is fundamental to that just political order so rarely found in the history plays, or in the world outside the theatre. (40)

Such vulnerability, for Heberle, must be associated with the etymology of *infans* (incapable of speech), making childhood innocence coincide with a lack of self-representation and agency. Morriss Henry Partee finds the innocent Shakespearean child endowed with anxiety and ambivalence due to an "indifferent or hostile adult environment" ("Fear in Shakespearean Childhood" 71).² The presumed innocence of the child offers the teasing possibility of surviving to represent Edenic innocence and dynastic longevity. Indeed, Richard Quinones argues that children represented to early modern thinkers "the thrill of continuity, the illumination of some victory wrested from time" (25).

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to understanding Shakespeare's children comes from the sentimental conception of childhood as the innocent, asexual, vulnerable, or even festive, promise of thriving futurity, which is the product of massive cultural shifts far from complete by the time Shakespeare penned his plays. As Philippe Ariès has noted, early modern developments in clothing, portraiture, games, and terminology reveal a rather new "concentration on the child" (47).³ While initial signs appear as early as the thirteenth century, according to Ariès, "evidence of its development became more plentiful and significant from the end of the sixteenth century and throughout the seventeenth" (47). The "child" of Shakespeare's age was riven with contradiction. On the one hand, this "new concept of childhood" renders the child, "on account of his sweetness, simplicity, and drollery . . . a source of amusement and relaxation for the adult" (129). On the other hand, as childhood was increasingly the centre of familial domesticity, public moralists "were unwilling to regard children as charming toys, for they saw them as fragile creatures of God who needed to be both safeguarded and reformed" (133). Childhood develops, then, at the uncomfortable border between excess sentimentality and violent discipline, producing a series of affective and sexual fault lines as gestures of care, discipline and education become available to erotic discourse.⁴ The seemingly secure border between adult sexuality and childhood innocence was anything but secure in early modernity. As Ariès argues,

one of the unwritten laws of contemporary morality, the strictest and best respected of all, requires adults to avoid any reference, above all any humorous reference, to sexual matters in the presence of children. This notion was entirely foreign to the society of old. (100)

Recent work on the history of sexuality examines the modern collision of childhood and sexuality and thus has much to offer studies of Shakespeare's children. As James Kincaid demonstrates in his analyses of childhood in Victorian and contemporary culture, the apparent isolation of children from adult sexuality under the rubric of innocence has produced two primary effects. First, the desirability of childhood innocence encourages an over-attention to its sexually depraved polar opposite (the paedophile):

By insisting so loudly on the innocence, purity, and asexuality of the child, we have created a subversive echo: experience, corruption, eroticism. More than that, by attributing to the child the central features of desirability in our culture—purity, innocence, emptiness, Otherness—we have made absolutely essential figures who would enact this desire. (*Child-Loving* 5)

Second, this construction of pure innocence renders the child a cipher. As Kincaid puts it,

The construction of the modern "child" is very largely an evacuation, the ruthless sending out of eviction notices. Correspondingly, the instructions we

receive on what to regard as sexually arousing tell us to look for (and often to create) this emptiness, to discover the erotic in that which is most susceptible to inscription, the blank page. On that page we can write what we like, write it and then long for it, love it, have it. Children are defined, and longed for, according to what *they* do not have. (*Erotic Innocence* 5)

While Kincaid usefully illuminates the sexual and affective axes of childhood, Lee Edelman's notion of "reproductive futurism" clarifies the temporal ramifications of a concept of childhood that serves as the lynchpin or "perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention" (3). The struggle to fight for children or save the children becomes an index of the survival of the body politic, justifying the maintenance of the status quo and the discipline of those failing to conform to that status quo. Edelman's analysis of childhood as the lynchpin of social normalcy and cultural sustainability finds its echo in early modern attempts to define the child as a function of futurity. Not only does Quinones find the child intimately involved in Renaissance notions of time; Jacques Gélis argues that a burgeoning sense of private individuality in the Renaissance competed with a collective logic in which all members of a family existed to perpetuate that family, making the child a kind of genealogical property. As Gélis puts it, "Humans perpetuated life without really being allowed to live it. Their sole duty was to pass life on to the next generation" (310). Thus the child is at once a genealogical prop and a seed of the unique self as childhood evolves historically "from anonymity to individuality" and is torn between contradictory if overlapping narratives defining its purported essence, the future, as the result of progress, providence, destiny or chance. Trading in childhood is thus always trading in futures, but those futures tend to come at the price of actual children.

Subject to contradictory conceptions and irresolvable tensions in early modernity and obscured by modern-day notions of childhood, the child of Shakespeare's age constitutes not only a critical cultural fault line but also the site of an overload of significance. To return to Cleanth Brooks, we might say that Shakespeare's children always exceed the limits of metaphor; they constitute uncanny signifiers whose threatening overload of sexual, affective and temporal meaning requires minimization or elimination. Here, I want to explain the frequent death or disappearance of Shakespeare's children with recourse to this overload of significance, seeing child roles not as independent of histories of boy actors on the stage or historically shifting conceptions of childhood in early modernity but more precisely as symbolic casualties of cultural conflicts, literary test cases of what the idea of the child could and could not accomplish and at what point attempts to perform the rapidly shifting functions assigned to childhood provoke representational collapse.⁵

Before his bloody rise to power, Shakespeare's (soon-to-be) Richard III claims he could "set the murderous Machiavel to school" (*3 Henry VI*, 3.2.193). Of the many detestable deeds for which early modern and contemporary audiences love to hate Richard, what could be more poignant and more vicious than the imprisonment and murder of his own kin, the young Prince Edward and the

young Duke of York, those “tender babes/ Whom envy hath immured” in the tower (*Richard III* [Folio], 4.1.104–5)? Recent criticism has illuminated the ways in which Richard’s physical deformity suggests the deformations of subjectivity, historicity and maternity in early modernity (Charnes; Garber, *Shakespeare’s Ghost Writers*; Adelman). Such developments have perhaps obscured the extent to which the death of *children* anchors Richard’s infamy. As A. J. Pollard points out, “The earliest, best known and dominant story [of the historical *Richard III*] is that of the cruel tyrant who murdered his innocent nephews in the Tower” (3).

The sentimental value accorded childhood innocence makes it easy to assume that the murder of children has some special status in *Richard III*. Yet, if Richard could have schooled Niccolò Machiavelli, another figure early modernity loved to hate, can we say that children are necessarily different from any other targets of a sovereign’s *virtu*? Indeed, it is because the idea of murder for political gain was so far from novel in early modernity that Machiavelli’s *The Prince* could offer such blunt, if still startling, evaluations of the efficacy of such sovereign cruelty. Machiavelli argues that “[t]hose who use cruelty well may indeed find both God and their subjects are prepared to let bygones be bygones” (30). While any political strategy may fail, excessive cruelty is far less likely to hinder a ruler than excessive compassion. According to Machiavelli, “love attaches men by ties of obligation, which, since men are wicked, they break whenever their interests are at stake. But fear restrains men because they are afraid of punishment” (52). Richard certainly has no trouble avoiding the pitfalls of love and compassion; far from it—he schemes and murders with an ease even Machiavelli might admire. Yet he directs his malice (or more accurately his ambition or *virtu*) at *all* those who block his path. Politics may prove dangerous to children in history plays such as *Richard III*, but Richard’s all-too-trusting brother, Clarence, also must be slain to clear a path to the throne. In *Richard III*, all royal “children” between Richard and the throne become targets, regardless of age.

The contrast between Richard’s indifference to the suffering of children murdered for political gain and the public’s avidly displayed grief for those children highlights rapidly shifting conceptions of childhood in mediaeval and early modern Europe. Indeed, for all the horror replete in the act of murdering children, the memorializing of slain innocents in *Richard III* generates a profoundly disturbing afterlife. Having commissioned on Richard’s behalf “The most arch deed of piteous massacre/ That ever yet this land was guilty of” (4.3.2–3), Tyrrell describes its aftermath. The murderers, Dighton and Forrest,

[TYRRELL] Albeit they were fleshed villains, bloody dogs,
Melting with tenderness and mild compassion,
Wept like two children in their deaths’ sad story.
‘O thus’, quoth Dighton, ‘lay the gentle babes’;
‘Thus, thus’, quoth Forrest, ‘girdling one another
Within their alabaster innocent arms.
Their lips were four red roses on a stalk,
And in their summer beauty kissed each other.’
(4.3.6–13)

The weeping perpetrators of the crime become not only poetic in their elegies but are themselves “like two children”, thus replacing the dead princes who are transformed, in Ovidian fashion, into cold, beautiful statues whose innate sweetness and vitality emerge as floral splendour. The erotic embrace of the boys suggests that in death the two complete a self-involved circuit of beauty, one all the more appealing for excluding the viewer who becomes the sole sentimental spectator of a tragic but gorgeous still life, a “sweet work of nature” (4.3.18).

The eroticized grief of this depiction transforms murderers into compassionate children and dead boys into floral statuary. Even the boys’ mother, Queen Elizabeth, describes them as “unblown flowers, new-appearing sweets”, as she requests their souls “[h]over about her” to hear a “mother’s lamentation” (4.4.10, 14–15). The remorse of Forrest and Dighton renders the dead boys beautiful, distant objects available for public consumption. While Elizabeth makes these dead children available for sentimental adoration, her lamentation requires *their* witness. In both cases, the spectator’s affect transforms and then displaces the actual children. The dead princes become signatures of their mother’s grief and ill-fortune. She wonders “who hath any cause to mourn but we?” (4.4.34). Elizabeth’s lament becomes part of a competitive chorus of grief initiated by Queen Margaret, the Duchess of York, and Queen Elizabeth in the first act. While sorrow offers these women a unique opportunity for speech in the hard, masculine world of Shakespearean history, the precondition of that speech is the disappearance of the dead boys who so recently enthralled their spectators. As Kincaid puts it, “Needing the *idea* of the child so badly, we find ourselves sacrificing the bodies of children for it” (*Child-Loving* 6). The child becomes an innocent absence filled by the hopes, desires, and sentiments of others. In *Richard III*, murderers and mothers collaborate in eroticising innocence and concealing that eroticism in sentimentality.

With the murderers of these children rendered mourners, the monstrosity of the deed devolves upon the misshapen Richard. Indeed, as we might remember, Forrest and Dighton are referred to as “fleshed villains”, indicating they are, initially, hardened to a cruelty that is natural to their bodies. Once Forrest and Dighton are converted from natural born killers back into innocent children, that leaves Richard alone to constitute the “subversive echo” (to borrow Kincaid’s phrase) of the “tender babes”. Indeed, his infamous physical deformity resonates throughout the play as a temporal knot, being both the historical source and the prophetic sign of a malevolence born in the womb, both the physical imprint of vicious present actions and the oddly proleptic consequence of the curses of Richard’s victims. Richard is at once the monstrous child and the monstrous child-killer whose ruthless stratagems and vicious seductions violate temporal narratives of a future secured by the triumph of innocent youth.

The “murdered innocents” of *Richard III* offer two very different portraits of the threat children pose in the world of the play. On the way to the tower, the complacency of the heir, Edward, contrasts sharply with the precocity of his younger brother, the Duke of York, who banters with his uncle to demonstrate his

awareness of Richard's true nature. York's barbs do not escape the notice of Buckingham, who remarks, "With what a sharp, prodigal wit he reasons. . . . So cunning and so young is wonderful" (3.1.132, 135). Unlike the duller and more trusting Edward, the actual heir to the throne, the young York is like the little dagger he begs from his uncle. The threat York poses by this point is not a political one. Moreover, York's precocity has nothing to do with his position in the line of succession (indeed, the heir to the throne seems fairly simple-minded). Inasmuch as Edward represents the notion of childhood as genealogical continuity, the elimination of which merely requires an alternative genealogy, York represents childhood as a threatening perspicacity. However, the sentimentality following the boys' deaths occludes any memory of childhood precocity.

We see in *Richard III* contradictory attitudes towards childhood and children, from indifference to sentimentality to wariness. History suggests that Richard's indifference to children was soon to be a thing of the past and that the cloying sentimentality of eroticized childhood innocence was, eventually, to become ascendant. If the death of children is so compelling as ultimately to secure Richard's Machiavellian notoriety, why is Shakespeare's later play *King John*, a play whose plot revolves around the life and death of the young Prince Arthur and his usurping uncle, so much less memorable? Phyllis Rackin has argued that "*Richard III* has remained a popular play on the stage but its neat structure probably did not satisfy Shakespeare; for all the issues so comfortably resolved in the end of that play are opened up again in *King John*" (65–66). In addition to these questions about the nature of historical causation and political agency, *King John* poses a series of questions about children: What roles do children play in the world of politics? How do children alter our conception of the capacity to act theatrically or politically? How do sexual and affective investments in children and their innocence warp the texture of adult agency? If actual children are made ciphers by the notion of childhood innocence, what cultural investments fill the place of those children? What does the idea of childhood in early modernity tell us about how temporality and the unfolding of history were experienced and understood?

It might be easy, at first, to overlook *King John's* enquiry into childhood, inasmuch as the play seems to present a very familiar set of dilemmas concentrated on royal succession and national stability. According to Holinshed's *Chronicle*, King John's claim to the throne derived from Richard I, who "assigned the crowne of England" to John after first having made Arthur, the son of John's elder brother Geoffrey, his heir (Bullough 25). Holinshed reports that Arthur's claim to the crown came as a "presumptuous answer" to King John's request that Arthur abandon his alliance with the King of France. In this rash act, Arthur showed himself a youth "that wanted good counsel . . . abounding too much in his owne willfull opinion" (Bullough 25, 31). King John is similarly legitimate in the anonymous *The Troublesome Reign of King John* (Shakespeare's likely source),⁶ which renders Arthur no more than a pawn caught between the desires of King John and the invading French and Austrian powers and between the outraged Constance (Arthur's mother) and the manipulative Elinor of Aquitaine

(John's mother and Arthur's grandmother). Other early modern dramas (John Bale's allegorical morality play *King Johann* and Shakespeare's *King John*) render John a usurper who seizes power by taking advantage of his nephew's youth.

Despite the political and religious controversies that have been taken to be the primary concerns of Shakespeare's *King John*, it becomes clear that Shakespeare wanted his audience to think of Arthur as a child and not just as a child-king or an heir. In Holinshed's *Chronicle*, Arthur is a babe when John seizes the throne and a young gentleman by the time he tries to reclaim the crown. Geoffrey Bullough notes that in *The Troublesome Reign* Arthur is roughly fourteen, whereas in Shakespeare's *King John* Arthur is perhaps eight or ten (Bullough 26n). In his introduction to *King John*, E. A. J. Honigmann remarks, "Arthur, a young warrior in Holinshed, becomes a helpless child in the play" (lxiv). Or, as Heberle puts it, "Shakespeare is responsible for making Arthur a child". More importantly, he notes, Shakespeare's "replotting of history makes John's treatment of Arthur the fundamental action of his whole reign" (34). Foregrounding Arthur in this way, it has been argued, results in the "obscuring of the [play's] Protestant or patriotic message or its relegation to second place" (Waith 193).

Shakespeare's *Richard III* demonstrates how the disturbing precocity of children can be stamped out as easily by political violence as by sentimentality. In *King John*, Shakespeare more fully explores the extent to which Arthur, as a child, alters the action around him by virtue of an influence accorded him by powerful adult fantasies about childhood. Neither victim nor victor, neither *infans* nor adult, Arthur occupies a unique position in the play. At his most active, he speaks neither the mercy-provoking "innocent prate" (4.1.25) ascribed to him by his keeper, Hubert, nor the "cunning" (4.1.54) that Arthur fears Hubert will attribute to him as he pleads for his life, a cunning we might more properly associate with the young York. Shakespeare encourages us to see children as possessed of a potential independent of their relational value as markers of political capital, as mirrors of parental virtue (or vice), as sites of pathos, or as models of cultural cohesion and progress. Arthur, who seems far less precocious or dangerous than young York, threatens not merely genealogical order but the structures that determine how power and agency are constituted. Though Arthur is subject to the desires and fantasies of others, this displaced child sovereign functions throughout the play as (1) the seductive principle of sexuality, (2) a source of unmanageable affect, (3) a marker of unmanageable worldly desires or "commodity" and (4) a principle of dangerous mutability and unpredictable futurity. These uncanny qualities, more than Arthur's birth or political position, mark him for elimination in an England stumbling into modernity amid political and religious turmoil.⁷

Seduction comprises the primary experience of sexuality in *King John*. The central presence of a child in these scenes of seduction determines more generally the parameters of agency, as the appeal of eroticized childhood innocence deforms the capacity of all adults, whether sovereigns or subjects, to assert will or realize intentions. Arthur stands at the centre of two scenes of

We find another shared pentameter line: “Young boy I must. And will you? And I will.” Here, however, Hubert seals a pact with Arthur just as he imagines himself to have hardened his resolve to commit the murder. Arthur seduces him away from his intent not by reasoning and arguing but, rather, by deflecting that murderous intent with a series of questions that invoke love and devotion rather than pity or loyalty. Hubert fears the boy’s “innocent prate” will “awake [his] mercy” (4.1.25, 26) but Arthur’s talk is neither innocent nor precisely designed to awaken pity. Arthur reminds him, instead, of a handkerchief with which he daubed Hubert’s brow one night when he was sick, a handkerchief “The best [he] had—a princess wrought it [him]” (4.1.43). Finally, Arthur cries, “O, spare mine eyes,/ Though to no use but still to look on you” (4.1.101–2). The child proves irresistible and the scene is charged with an eroticism that resonates with Hubert’s prior exchange with King John, although here the dominant metaphors are ones of devotion, sickness and parenting. Rather than proving the child the object of adult compassion or violence, this scene demonstrates how Arthur warps the affective texture of the world around him to create with Hubert a relationship of mutual care. Indeed, Arthur recognizes his power over Hubert in the success of his pleas as Hubert proves incapable of hurting the boy, though he insists otherwise. Arthur sees that “the instrument is cold/ And would not harm [him]” (4.1.103–4) and, moreover, that the threatening Hubert is “like a dog that is compelled to fight” by its master or “disguised” (4.1.115, 126). Seduced into devotion by Arthur, Hubert bids the “pretty child, sleep doubtless and secure” (4.1.129). While earlier Hubert enters into an erotic compact with John, one sealed by the death of a politically problematic child, Hubert here enters an erotic compact with a child whose power derives from an eroticism rooted not merely in seductive language but in a magnetism associated with physical care. Arthur’s actions confirm that the Shakespearean child can be the principle of seduction, not just its object. The child does not exist to embody or perform vulnerability. This is, rather, the fantasy of adults. The Shakespearean child incites a vulnerability in others that arises from a capacity to care for, rather than merely pity, others.

So far we have seen that Arthur is first the conduit of an irresistible, murderous desire that passes between King John and Hubert. Arthur then generates his own irresistible appeal in a mirroring scene of seduction with Hubert. The child thus triangulates the intensely erotic bonds on which King John’s tenuous sovereignty depends. But if child seduction is the engine of sexuality that forms and deforms agency in *King John*, grief for the absent child is the engine of perverse affect that warps the political universe of the play. Arthur also triangulates the intense rivalry between his grandmother, Elinor, and his mother, Constance, whose rancorous disputes lend a public face to the vigorous king-making in which both engage. One of the primary features of Shakespeare’s *King John* is the presence of vocal women central to the action of the play, women whose emotive capacities are as powerful as they are discomfiting. Juliet Dusinberre writes eloquently about the extent to which the emotional excesses of “the play’s embarrassing and embarrassed women”

were excised in many theatrical productions. Indeed, Elinor's and Constance's cursing and grieving speeches have been frequently cut (41). Dusinberre joins Eugene Waith in arguing that modern viewers tend to turn away from the character of Constance and her overwrought grief "with a certain embarrassment and impatience" (Waith 200). Noting the popularity of *King John* in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, Waith imagines "modern suspicion of emotional appeal" accounts for *King John*'s slipping status (200).

Dusinberre is surely right to find in the women of *King John* a "subversive discourse" that, even when that subversion is revoked and the women silenced, exposes "the hollowness of male power structures" (52). Yet as in *Richard III*, the assertion of female agency comes only with the disappearance of the actual child. Arthur generates in his mother an experience of unmanageable affect, affect that can neither be contained nor endured. As such, Constance replaces Arthur with a series of personifications that display her own affective state to the exclusion of her son. As *King John* and the King of France, Constance's one-time supporter, briefly entertain a peace that would come at the cost of Arthur's claim to the throne, Constance dissents, shrieking, "War, War, no peace! Peace is to me a war" (3.1.39). Constance rages against the French and even against her own son, who asks his mother to be "content". She responds:

CONSTANCE If thou that bidd'st me be content wert grim,
 Ugly and sland'rous to thy mother's womb,
 Full of displeasing blots and sightless stains,
 Lame, foolish, crooked, swart, prodigious,
 Patched with foul moles and eye-offending marks,
 I would not care, I then would be content,
 For then I should not love thee, no, nor thou
 Become thy great birth, nor deserve a crown.
 But thou art fair, and at thy birth, dear boy,
 Nature and Fortune joined to make thee great.
 Of Nature's gifts thou mayst with lilies boast,
 And with the half-blown rose.
 (2.2.43–54)

As Arthur requests calm, Constance constructs two portraits of her son. The first is a glorious Arthur and the other an ugly and slanderous product of her womb. Constance constructs in gruesome detail a phantom child, a marred Arthur whose appearance would appropriately embody his lack of power. Constance refutes this monstrous child, describing the "real" Arthur, who is no slander to his mother's womb because Nature and Fortune endow him with a nobility written in the floral imagery *King John* and *Richard III* share.

Neither the monstrous nor the glorified child of Constance's imagination reflects the sentiments or interests of the actual Arthur, who, during one of the many arguments between Constance and Elinor, says, "I would that I were low laid in my grave./ I am not worth this coil that's made for me" (2.1.164–5). Arthur imagines his own death to be the best way to bring peace to the war-torn

lands in which competing political factions wreak destruction in his name. When John's forces capture Arthur, he fears his mother will die of grief, while Constance initiates a series of lamentations that replace her missing child with garish substitutes. Unlike *The Troublesome Reign of King John*, in which King Philip of France and the papal legate cut short Constance's grief, Shakespeare's Constance gives full voice to her lament. While Constance's speeches are often celebrated as beautiful instances of maternal grief, the visceral detail of this startling apostrophe to death remains alarming:

CONSTANCE No, I defy all counsel, all redress,
 But that which ends all counsel, true redress:
 Death, Death, O amiable, lovely Death!
 Thou odoriferous stench, sound rottenness!
 Arise forth from the couch of lasting night,
 Thou hate and terror to prosperity,
 And I will kiss thy detestable bones,
 And put my eyeballs in thy vaulty brows,
 And ring these fingers with thy household worms,
 And stop this gap of breath with fulsome dust,
 And be a carrion monster like thyself.
 Come grin on me, and I will think thou smil'st,
 And buss thee as thy wife. Misery's love,
 O, come to me!
 (3.4.23–36)

In the absence of Arthur, Constance conjures an embodiment of death, which she imagines would relieve her suffering. This apostrophe suggests a grim pleasure in the erotic congress that comes from dwelling on death. It is as if the personification of death has replaced the missing Arthur, and Constance's preoccupation with her son's beauty and erotic innocence manifests itself in death's sexual embrace. Death, like the monstrous phantom child Constance imagines, becomes Arthur's alter ego; death, with his rotting flesh, fills a void in her imaginative landscape.

Although Constance's grief at first seems to respond to the loss of her child, it becomes clear that Constance's ideal consummation with her child requires his death. Though Arthur is at this point captured and still living, Constance imagines that only death will allow a reunion with her son:

[CONSTANCE] If that be true, I shall see my boy again;
 For since the birth of Cain, the first male child,
 To him that did but yesterday suspire,
 There was not such a gracious creature born.
 But now will canker-sorrow eat my bud,
 And chase the native beauty from his cheek;
 And he will look as hollow as a ghost,
 As dim and meagre as an ague's fit,
 And so he'll die; and rising so again,
 When I shall meet him in the court of heaven,

I shall not know him; therefore never, never
 Must I behold my pretty Arthur more.
 (3.4.78–89)

In Constance's imagination, Arthur hovers, wraithlike, between the "pretty Arthur", that glorious, beatified child she will meet in heaven but not recognize, and the afflicted Arthur, who is sinking into physical corruption like the body of death with which Constance will consummate her relationship to loss. Constance's repeated "will" carries all the forceful resonance of that word as she wills the absence and death of the living Arthur. In her imagination, Arthur is already dead ("him that did but yesterday suspire") and always about to die and rise again. Constance kills Arthur repeatedly in her mind to provide herself with the affective and imaginative space in which to stage her own fantasies. Were Constance to "behold" her actual child, his real body would interrupt the idea she has come to love. Thus, "never, never/ Must [she] then behold [her] pretty Arthur more".

Noting the excess of Constance's affective display, Cardinal Pandulph and King Philip accuse her of holding "too heinous a respect of grief" and of being "as fond of grief as of [her] child" (3.4.90, 92). Constance refutes both the king's and the cardinal's charges of over-indulgence and madness, saying, "If I were mad, I should forget my son,/ Or madly think a babe of clouts were he" (3.4.57–8). Though Constance is in no danger of forgetting the idea of her son, Arthur does become a "babe of clouts", a strange rag doll or toy in Constance's imagination. Accused of loving grief more than her son, she replies:

CONSTANCE Grief fills the room up of my absent child,
 Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,
 Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words,
 Remembers me of all his gracious parts,
 Stuffs out his vacant garments with his form;
 (3.4.93–7)

In Constance's imagination, the beauty of her child is so seductive that she turns away from the real, living Arthur to animate his "vacant garments" with the dense substance of her own affect. In its excess Constance's grief exposes the mechanism of erotic sentimentality we see at work in *Richard III*, in which the actuality of dead children disappears into the floral statuary of the idea of murdered innocents. Here, Constance's sentimentalizing imagination inflates the presence of the child to the extent that it becomes ridiculous. It is no wonder Constance disappears as she does. If Shakespeare follows Holinshed and the *Troublesome Reign* in disposing of Constance and Elinor quickly, Constance's death silences the voice that betrays, as sexual, the sentimentality that governs adult fantasies of childhood. Constance's congress with death indicates that the flip side of the fantasy of childhood purity is what Kincaid calls childhood's "subversive echo: experience, corruption, eroticism" (*Child-Loving* 5). The death of the child, which ought to confirm his innocence, reveals instead the

fleshy underpinnings of adult fantasy and the contagious affect released by those fantasies.

The affective contagion unleashed by the child appears not only in Constance's gruesome apostrophes but in the language used by those around her. King Philip of France and Cardinal Pandolph attempt to contain the unbound affect of Constance's display as handily emblemized by the hair she tears at. Philip asks her to "bind up those tresses", which he then metaphorizes,

[KING PHILIP] O, what love I note
 In the fair multitude of those her hairs!
 Where but by chance a silver drop hath fallen,
 Even to that drop ten thousand wiry friends
 Do glue themselves in sociable grief,
 Like true, inseparable, faithful loves,
 Sticking together in calamity.
 (3.4.61–7)

King Philip, in translating Constance's hair into a figure of her grief, attempts to bind the affect in language just as he would see Constance bind her hair. But as he extends the figure, finding emotional strength in the "sociable grief" of "ten thousand wiry friends", the hair becomes ridiculously animate—like the gruesome figure of death in Constance's apostrophe. Again we find the affect evoked in Arthur's name too powerful to be recuperated, which causes a proliferation of collapsing metaphorical constructions.

In the encounters between King John and Hubert and between Hubert and Arthur, a concatenation of murderous longing, seduction, and nurture indicates the powerful allure Arthur possesses. In Constance's imagination, Arthur's allure appears in a contagion of perversely embodied affect. In the world of *King John*, in which one's position can no longer be guaranteed by birth, the public face of Arthur's dangerous allure resonates with the unnatural slippages described by the play's interlocking languages of marred products and desirable commodities. *King John* announces the instability of heredity in its opening scene, where the French ambassador refers to King John's "borrowed majesty" (1.1.4). Later, the King of France refers to John as an "unnatural uncle" (2.1.10) for having violated his relationship to Arthur as he violates the lawful succession. The insecurity of inheritance appears all the more visibly in that most famous and favourite of characters in *King John*, Philip Falconbridge, or Philip the Bastard.⁸ Whereas *King Lear*'s bastard, Edmund, comes to revel in bastardry as a sign of his moral opposition to the social order that denigrates him, *King John*'s Bastard revels in his illegitimacy because it reveals a greater lineage: that of his father, Richard Coeur de Lion. He becomes both critic and spokesman in *King John* for the concept named "commodity", which refers to self-making, self-interest, expediency and personal gain. As the political landscape lurches from enmity to newly found friendship between the French and English upon the proposed marriage of Louis and Blanche, the Bastard laughingly describes the "Mad world, mad kings, mad composition" he witnesses, all of which are shaped not by divine

or moral order but by commodity, “that same purpose-changer, that sly devil,/ That broker that still breaks the pate of faith” (2.1.562, 568–69).

The Bastard portrays with relish the hateful force of self-advantage and in so doing renders “commodity” yet another site of the displacement of the actual Arthur by a threatening and uncanny concretisation of cultural fantasy:

[BASTARD] That smooth-faced gentleman, tickling commodity;
Commodity, the bias of the world,
The world who of itself is peisèd well,
Made to run even upon even ground,
Till this advantage, this vile-drawing bias,
This sway of motion, this commodity,
Makes it take head from all indifferency,
From all direction, purpose, course, intent;
And this same bias, this commodity,
This bawd, this broker, this all-changing word
(2.1.574–83)

Commodity, the Bastard explains, makes “kings break faith”, such as when the King of France betrays Arthur and Constance’s cause to avoid an inconvenient and messy war with England. Of course the Bastard’s personification is at least as interesting as the actual workings of commodity in the play. Commodity is a “smooth-faced gentleman”, suggesting that the allure of youth is part of this principle of slippage, this “bias of the world” and “sway of motion” that draws men from “all direction, purpose, course, intent”. Commodity, at once a boy, a bawd and a broker, is much like a male version of Fortune, whom Constance berates earlier in the play. Although the Bastard is not here describing Arthur, the magnetism of smooth-faced Commodity is not unlike that of the child throughout *King John*. Arthur may not be an adult capable of acting, but he is also more than just the object of other’s whims. Although described as “this oppressed boy” (2.1.177), and although John’s order “Submit thee boy” (2.1.159) typifies Arthur’s treatment in the play, Arthur exerts influence as the mysterious principle of wilful and unpredictable change.

Arthur incites unmanageable desires and affects; his seemingly polyvalent and promiscuous properties mark him as an engine of fictional variation as the genre of romance is harnessed to convey something of the child’s mutability. The vacant garments and the doll of rags (or clouts) of Constance’s fantasies return in the boy’s final gesture of dressing himself as a ship-boy to escape from the violence of history into unknown future possibility embodied by romance. If he survives his escape, Arthur claims, he’ll “find a thousand shifts to get away” (4.3.7). “Shift” here is a stratagem or plan but also a new set of clothes and a new identity to go with it. Whereas earlier Arthur wished he were a shepherd’s boy, invoking the nostalgia of pastoral, here he is like Viola, attempting to assemble from the shipwreck of circumstance a new plot. These scenarios of disguise and adventure so central to *Twelfth Night* and to romance more generally remind us of Arthur’s ambiguous allure (Heberle 38).

More importantly, Arthur's gesture towards romance marks an aspiration to eschew the past for the sake of the future and alter the temporality of Shakespearean history. Early in the play, Arthur is described as the generational consequence of his birth:

[KING PHILIP] This little abstract doth contain that large
Which died in Geoffrey; and the hand of time
Shall draw this brief into as huge a volume.
(2.1.101–3)

Arthur (the “little abstract” that will in time reveal “as huge a volume” as his father, Geoffrey) is meant to be a mimetic miniature. In this view, time functions to shape the present into an already anticipated future, one that develops progressively and predictably from the seeds of the past. This moment indicates the essentially “providential and fundamentally linear” temporality that David Scott Kastan argues is one of two fundamental ways of understanding Shakespeare's “rich consciousness of time” (12, 6). Later, as his reign and health collapse, King John adumbrates an increasingly anxious experience of that temporality:

[KING JOHN] I am a scribbled form, drawn with a pen
Upon a parchment, and against this fire
Do I shrink up.
(5.7.32–4)

John feels himself to be little more than a slender outline, a mere “scribbled form”, indicating that his experience of himself as a historical phenomenon is an experience of impermanence. Kastan argues that “[t]hrough lenses ground by the Reformation and the Copernican revolution, time appears more as the measure of a movement towards dissolution than as the medium in which God's creatures fulfil their potentiality” (12). Similarly, Phyllis Rackin notes a shift in early modernity from providential to Machiavellian conceptions of historical causation and change (71–85). While John shrinks before the disastrous fires of historical circumstance, Arthur's providential expansion from brief abstract into huge volume of sovereignty is dashed against an unforgiving earth. Inexplicably, Arthur leaps to his death in his very attempt to escape:

[ARTHUR] As good to die and go, as die and stay.
He leaps down
O me! My uncle's spirit is in these stones.
Heaven take my soul, and England keep my bones!
He dies.
(4.3.8–10)

The absurd and accidental manner of his death compares strangely with the malicious intent of child killing in *Richard III*. Although his death is laid at the

feet of John, a sense of inevitability hovers here, as if the line “As good to die and go, as die and stay” suggests that all Arthur’s eventualities must result in death. For the sake of England, though no longer for the sake of John, Arthur must be reduced to no more than bones.

Arthur’s death represents more than just the triumph of the pragmatic over the providential or of chaos and violence over progress and hope. This child is eliminated just at the moment in which he is about to exceed the play’s temporal and historiographic parameters. Arthur is, consequently, killed, mourned, sentimentalized and swiftly replaced. Henry III appears (as if from nowhere) as Arthur’s substitute: the new heir and the play’s representative royal child. No longer is the child an ambiguous, seductive presence. Rather, as Henry III refers to the dead King John, he speaks for the dominant temporal clichés:

PRINCE HENRY Even so must I run on, and even so stop.
 What surety of the world, what hope, what stay,
 When this was now a king, and now is clay?
 (5.7.67–9)

Despite the apparent absence of a providential future, Henry extracts from the corpse of King John a lesson about mortality, as he transforms the play’s troubled sovereignty into moral exemplarity. Mutability is tamed in the form of lamentable mortality as the wild principle of uncertainty comes to refer exclusively to the inevitability of death, which bolsters Henry III’s temporal and political claims. In Henry III we have the child as bulwark against the ravages of time and the mishaps that impede orderly political succession; he is the very kind of prop necessary to provide the notes of what Quinones describes as the generally optimistic tone of Shakespeare’s history plays, in which kings who waste or ignore time fail and those who use time wisely succeed (291–351). Far from the exemplary child of progress and providence, Arthur is the perverse child, the most desired and reviled of commodities in the world of *King John*, in whom futurity beckons with frightening and unimaginable variety and with the overwhelming desires and affects that wreck the ship of his nation’s progress.

Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, in Rutter’s view, wages a war against children who represent specific and anticipated blood lines and futures. Thus “to stop the future”, she argues, “Macbeth must stop the children—by slaughtering them” (Introduction xxv). As *King John* indicates, Shakespeare’s children are not just the markers of particular and imaginable timelines or of alternative lines of succession. The war Shakespeare illuminates is not against the future anterior (that which will have already been) but rather against a more ambiguous threat. Shakespeare deploys the child to stage encounters with the radical disjunction futurity offers and the assault of that unimaginable futurity, which exceeds narratives of providence or of progress, upon the present. Thus, the infinite possibility of childhood is more a cause for alarm than a source of civic optimism. In *Hamlet*, Ophelia suggests that in futurity lurks not only madness but terror: “Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be” (4.5.42–43).

Arthur, in the end, is the painful hitch between historicity and the modernity of a terrifying and uncertain future. As the site of time out of joint, he must die.

Time is always out of joint for those such as Arthur. However odious and unthinkable the killing of actual children may be, the killing of Shakespeare's children was not primarily designed to provide sites of pathos or opportunities to adore and mourn youthful vigour and innocence. These children were, instead, experiments, radical and compact inquiries into the way the idea of childhood provokes intense and unmanageable thoughts, feelings, experiences and desires, all unfolding in language and in time. Without risking the discomfort caused by careful attention to such complex and often disturbing sexual, affective and temporal investments in childhood (now and in early modernity), we risk reading Shakespeare's child characters as straightforward evidence of the lives of early modern children or as embodiments of sentimental stereotypes, instead of noting the way such investments require children to perform strenuous forced labour in the service of cultural significance. Shakespeare's precocious and often endangered children remain markers of what Jacques Derrida refers to as a promise of the future as "an alterity that cannot be anticipated", one "that cannot be awaited *as such*, or recognised in advance therefore" (65). Fredric Jameson's recent study of science fiction not only cites Jurgen Habermas's critique of the power of modernity's narratives of progress "to close off the future as a *source* of disruption with the aid of teleological constructions of history" but, moreover, claims that such narratives aim to "colonize the future, to draw the unforeseeable back into tangible realities in which one can invest and on which one can bank" (228). Jameson suggests that "we need to develop an anxiety about losing the future" (*Archaeologies* 233). Kiernan Ryan's evaluation of contemporary Shakespeare criticism, which borrows heavily from Jameson's early writings on temporality,⁹ attends not to "the gravitational grip of the past or present" on Shakespeare's plays but rather to what is "printed into their form and texture by the pressure of futurity" (175). If Ryan is right to suggest that "Shakespeare's drama might be drawn as much towards a future beyond our apprehension as back to its place of origin in the past" (65) then a new wave of criticism, that is to illuminate not only Shakespeare's children but also early modern childhood, must be more anxious about losing that radical futurity than it is about preserving archives tainted by our own investments in finding in those children either the pathos and charm of the antiquated past or our own bright and promising futures.

Notes

- [1] See also Rutter's "Remind Me: How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?" and "Looking Like a Child; or, *Titus: The Comedy*".
- [2] See also Partee's "Shakespeare and the Aggression of Children".
- [3] Linda Pollock's *Forgotten Children* offers a significant challenge to Ariès' position in claiming that the concept of the child long pre-dates the early modern period. The disagreement seems to rest in whether or not the concept of the child pre-dates the

- early modern period and in whether or not shifting concepts of childhood lead to different styles of parental care or neglect.
- [4] See Stewart, particularly chapter 3.
- [5] These children are not, then, purely verisimilar, despite an understandable desire to extract evidence of the life of actual early modern children from Shakespeare's plays. Blake typifies the claims of critics who find that Shakespeare "enriches the tone of [children's] scenes with the humour of life-like speech and precocious wit in what amounts to a strikingly varied portrayal of children's behaviour" ("Shakespeare's Roles" 123).
- [6] See Braunmuller (2–17) and Mattsson (7–11).
- [7] For the historical and political context of King John's rule, see Saccio.
- [8] See, among others, readings of the Bastard by Gieskes and Hobson.
- [9] See Ryan (38–43) on Jameson's understanding of futurity in *The Political Unconscious*.

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