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Precocity and Performance

Child Characters in Two Shakespeare Plays

The article attempts a close study of the child characters occurring in Shakespeare's *Richard III* and *King John* to problematize their location on a grid defined by the cultural or aesthetic binary of precocity/innocence. Whereas Arthur's ornate, far-fetched pleadings in *King John* lack viability independent of a theatrical idiom, in *Richard III* we have a page coolly advising an assassination, a brother-sister duo participating in a matrix of adult hostilities that they fail to appreciate fully, Prince Edward whose sense of danger is of little help, and the little Duke of York who glibly defies Richard without gauging his murderous schemes. We need to exercise scepticism about marking these characters straightaway as "innocent" or "precocious," and have to take account of theatrical mediations as well as trans-cultural, trans-historical slippages in signification. The article gestures towards the agencies (however rudimentary and inefficacious) embodied by such child characters, and tries to investigate how they subscribe to or undercut a unitary, overarching topos of "childhood."

Lucrative Monsters

In Ben Jonson's play *The Alchemist* (first performed 1610) Lovewit, when returning to his London house after a few months, hears from his neighbours that in his absence it was visited daily by huge and motley crowds. He wonders what curiosity his butler Jeremy might have installed to lure such multitudes, and guesses that among other prodigies it could be "The boy of six year old with the great thing" (5.1.25). In Francis Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (first performed 1607) the Citizen's Wife mentions a similar (if not the same) curiosity, "of all the sights that ever were in London, since I was married, methinks the little child that was so fair grown about the members was the prettiest" (3.2.140–142). These two references may be topical in nature and directed at a real life London sensation. The boy with the overgrown member (traceable to a hormonal quirk) constitutes a carnivalesque spectacle together with "the bull with the five legs and two pizzles . . . the dogs that dance the morris, and the hare o'the tabor" (*Bartholomew Fair*, 5.4.85–87). The boy who becomes a lucrative public attraction for his endowment may be invoked as a metaphor for the boy actors performing on the early modern stage. He may also

afford a convenient sign under which one may expatiate on and summarize the precocity frequently associated with the profession of the boy actors and the roles they played.

The boy's *parts* (organs) are monstrous because not commensurate with his age, whereas the boy actors' *parts* (roles, as well as the ability to attempt them) are not always commensurate with their age or station in life. In fact, just as the boy's disproportionately huge private parts make him spectacular, the dissonance created by the diminutive boy actors mouthing obscene quibbles (for example) or participating in the depiction of political/sexual conspiracies probably made them attractive to the early modern audiences. Even when the boy actors play their age or younger characters, the roles are often found to be precocious. Just as the display of the boy's Priapus-like private parts would injure more refined sentiments, the child roles that the boy actors essayed may appear to many as odious parades of adult(-like) *parts*. Marjorie Garber, for one, is definitely scandalized:

Those [few child characters] who do appear [in the plays of the Shakespeare canon] are both pert and malapert, disconcertingly solemn and prematurely adult: the Princes in the tower, whose uncle's exasperation with them may be shared to a degree by the audience; Macduff's and Coriolanus' sons, both pathetically martial copies of their fathers; Mamilius, whose proposal to tell a 'sad tale . . . for winter' reveals an intuitive comprehension of the problems of Sicilia and of his own impending doom. These are not, by and large, successful dramatic characters; their disquieting adulthood 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.¹

Garber vaguely gestures towards "reasons . . . both historical and dramatic" which underlie Shakespeare's characterization of children, but does not sympathetically probe them. There remains the need for a more nuanced appraisal of the child characters and the material conditions of their production and reception. There is no evidence to prove that these child characters in a body appeared as implausible or abhorrent to Shakespeare's intended audience. At the same time, to make a deliberate understatement, today's visual culture does not shy away from precocious children.

For all Shakespeare plays the text used here is *The Norton Shakespeare, Based on the Oxford Edition*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt *et al.* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997). For other early modern plays, the source text used is *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, ed. David Bevington *et al.* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002).

1. Marjorie Garber, *Coming of Age in Shakespeare* (New York: Routledge, 1981), p. 30.

The sauciness or unseasonable solemnity of the children which causes Garber's disaffection might have in effect translated in great part to the USP of the boy actors. Michael Shapiro's estimate of the boy companies suggests as much:

only the children offered the special mixture of pertness and naivety, audacity and innocence, which Roger Ascham felt was overly prized in upper-class English families. Elizabeth herself is said to have savored this combination of cheekiness and charm, a quality which probably accounted for the widespread appeal of boy companies in early modern London.²

Needless to say, the boy actors in the adult companies also partook of the dialectical appeal that Shapiro points out, and the playwrights who worked in close collaboration with the acting companies, and in at least considerable knowledge of the cast, would surely capitalize on this possibility. Hence the theatrical dynamics of the boy actors might be reflected in the repertoire created for them – including the roles of (pert and malapert) children. It is also necessary to realize that drama has a vested interest in the *dramatic*, in the deviation from the common-or-garden experience. In this scheme, a cheeky and impish brat who tantalizingly defies the norms of social desirability makes more sense than a pious, obedient child. The boy with the prodigious private parts can make for a public show only because of his deviation from the biological norm. Likewise, one may weigh the premise that the child actors drew crowds because they departed (onstage at least) from the culturally prescribed roles and attributes of (decent, respectable) children. This departure from the norm would no doubt be constituted in a way that did not radically defy the expectations of the adult world, but produced a minor, pleasant surprise. Precocity is charming so long as it does not threaten or resist the adult world, and does not totally coincide with skills and privileges specific to the adult scheme of things. It is only the distance thus maintained that enables an aesthetic appraisal of precocious children.

However, the show offered by the boy, thanks to his monstrous phallus, consisted only in display or exhibition, whereas the show offered by the child actors as they performed child roles consisted both in display (of their embodied child-ness) and of *mimesis* (i.e., representation of certain fictive children). Whereas the boy's "great thing" is a concrete, biological aberration, the precocity (or otherwise) of the boy actor on stage is a trained and orchestrated exercise more deeply implicated in culture. The elements of display and representation certainly intersected and coloured each other in the person of the child actor, but more importantly they oper-

2. Michael Shapiro, "Boy Companies and Private Theatres," in *A Companion to Renaissance Drama*, ed. Arthur Kinney (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 314–325, p. 314.

ated within a setting that aimed at an engaging theatricality, and catered to adult tastes. To reiterate the point: what we have before us is a *theatrical* child – in all possible senses of the word. Since the child roles were designed in terms of public performance and theatrical stylistics, some degree of distancing from the model of lived experience was bound to occur. A close study of child characters in the Shakespeare canon will reveal that they do not evoke precocity as a clumsy, stilted and predictable dramatic apparatus, as Garber’s observation tends to suggest; but project it as a nuanced and graded experience with variations based on contingencies of situation and personality.

Of all the child characters in Shakespeare we have at one end of the gamut Mamillius of *The Winter’s Tale* (perhaps the most childlike) and at the other, the diminutive page Mote (or Moth) of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* with his topical allusions and multifarious rhetorical prestidigitations.³ The fact that Mamillius declares “A sad tale’s best for winter” (2.1.27) has been seized upon too readily by Garber (quoted above) to reach the conclusion that he has an instinctive understanding of the tension brewing in the Bohemian court. Although his remark furnishes the play its title, it is only accidental and does not speak for any instinctive wisdom on his part. Needless to say, Mamillius has no clue about his fate – his death is the only permanent loss in this play of recuperation and reconciliation. However, it would be wrong to deny a child character like York (*Richard III*) his share of precocity when it becomes strongly apparent from a reading of the play-text. If there are palpable signs of guile or obliquity in a child character, it is necessary to examine how they contribute to the particular dramatic context. Before we take up a few child characters for detailed discussion, it may be useful to review quickly the significances of precocity in the learned tradition that an early modern playwright would have inherited.

Tradition and the Individual Child Character

Along with the term *cursus aetatis* (course of ages), the expression *tempestivitas* was introduced into the mainstream of Western intellectual tradition by Cicero’s influential discussion of old age, *De Senectute*.⁴ The term denotes “seasonableness,”

3. Lawhorn locates “about forty-five” child characters in the Shakespeare canon, while Rutter’s estimate comes to more than fifty. She also enumerates “notional or symbolic babies” and “off-stage children.” Mark Lawhorn, “Children in Shakesperae’s Plays: an Annotated Checklist,” in *Shakespeare and Childhood*, ed. Kate Chedzoy et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 233–249, p. 233; Carol Chillington Rutter, *Shakespeare and Child’s Play: Performing Lost Boys on Stage and Screen* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. xiii–xiv.

4. J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 1.

or the appropriate characteristics assigned to each age by Nature. These sentiments are echoed in the scripture: “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted.”⁵ If the *cursus aetatis* is taken as a biological norm, any violation of the seasonableness (as embodied by the precocious child) would signal a fundamental disharmony in the constitution of the person concerned, and is likely to bring an unhappy end. But there are certain contexts where the lack of conformity with the attributes of bodily age is commended, or, rather, such non-conformity is evoked as a trope for commendation. For example, in *Aeneid*, Book 9, it is remarked that Iulus (more commonly called Ascanius), the young son of Aeneas “bore beyond his years the mind and responsibilities of a man.”⁶ In addition, the trope of a boy too wise for his years was repeatedly used in the laments for the young dead.⁷ A variation on this trope is to be found in Jonson’s poem “On Salathiel Pavy: A Child of Queen Elizabeth’s Chapel” where he suggests that the boy actor played old men so convincingly that the gods took him for one: “And did act (what now we moan) / Old men so duly, / As sooth the Parcae thought him one, / He play’d so truly” (ll. 13–16).⁸ However, the most striking instance of precocity, celebrated in any number of early modern amatory poems, lies in the figure of Cupid – which represents the enigmatic nature of sexual passion. Biron in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* describes the paradoxical god as “This whimpled, whining, purblind, wayward boy, / This Signior Junior, giant dwarf, Dan Cupid” (3.1.164–165, my emphases).

As regards the Christian paradigm, the most time-honoured ideal for the transcendence of the classical, materialist concept of *cursus aetatis* is afforded by the concept of *aetates spiritualis* (stages of spirituality). According to the concept of spiritual age, a person irrespective of his/her bodily years may attain by grace the virtues associated with a particular natural age. This idea of transcendence is represented conspicuously by the topos of the *puer senilis* or *puer senex* (aged boy) that emerged in the late pagan Antiquity and enjoyed great popularity in the hagiographic literature of the Latin Middle Ages.⁹ The Biblical precedents of the topos

5. Eccl. 3:1–2.

6. Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. W. F. Jackson Knight (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958), pp. 234–5.

7. Burrow, p. 114. Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 99.

8. Ben Jonson, “An Epitaph on S[alathiel] P[avy], a child of Q[ueen] EL[izabeth’s] Chapel,” in *Poetry of the English Renaissance 1509–1660*, ed. J. William Hebel and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: F. S. Crofts, 1941), p. 499.

9. Burrow, p. 94; Curtius, p. 99.

may be located in the child Samuel who was preferred to the veteran priest Eli for ministering unto the Lord, and in the boy Daniel who sat in judgment on two lecherous old men (the apocryphal History of Susanna). Added to this, the Virgin Mary furnishes an example of the *puella senex* since, according to apocryphal Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, when she was taken to the Temple at the age of three she ascended the fifteen steps without once looking back at her parents and behaved like a comely person of thirty years.¹⁰

In this context precocity, typically in the childhood of a saint, is not a detestable quality. The attainments of venerable old age which the *puer senex* secures beyond his years may be recognized as *maturitas* (maturity), *gravitas* (solemnity), and *sapientia* (wisdom). A *locus classicus* of the topos may be found in the *Life of St Antony* (4th century) by Athanasius, where the saint in his early years is described as a precocious child:

And when he was a boy, he could not bear to be instructed in literature or to have anything to do with silly children's stories; but burning with the love of God, as it is written, he dwelt at home in innocence. He also often went to church with his parents, and avoided both infantile games and boyish thoughtlessness.¹¹

However, the most august provenance for the topos is the life of Christ himself, especially the episode of the *doctores*. The twelve-year old Christ got separated from his parents at the Temple:

And when they found him not, they turned back again to Jerusalem, seeking him. And it came to pass, that after three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions. And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding [*prudencia* in the Vulgate] and answers.¹²

Such authorities as Origen, Jerome and Augustine interpreted the episode as the boy Christ teaching the erudite elders. The English Mystery cycles of Chester, York, Wakefield and Coventry all staged this episode, where the doctors are at first sceptical and disdainful but are soon won over by the boy Christ's erudition. Shake-

10. Burrow, p. 102.

11. Quoted in Burrow, p. 97. Some other examples of the *puer* or *puella senex* may be found in the careers of the following saints all of whom died in their early years defending their faith: Agapitus, Prisca, Justus of Beauvais, Eulalia of Barcelona, Eulalia of Mérida, Agnes of Rome, Saint Dymphna, Fausta of Sirmium, Pelagius of Constance, Pelagius of Cordova, and William of Norwich.

12. Luke 2:45–47.

speare as a Warwickshire child might have seen the Coventry version of the episode which has the boy Christ expound the mysteries of the Trinity and declare his double birth as man and god.¹³

While the attribute of precocity dramatically marks the lives of certain blessed individuals as special, it is to be recognized as an inversion (felicitous in their cases) of the norm rather than the norm itself. Many preachers pointed out that for the multitudes devoid of grace a departure from the *tempestivitas* is a sign of folly or vice. Christ's life was often projected as the ideal for all men to follow, and for this purpose the deviations of the *puer senex* had to be underplayed. St Gregory goes so far as to state that Christ did not lecture the *doctores* at the Temple, but humbly listened to them and asked questions as was befitting his age. He also added that Christ had waited, up to the age of thirty, before starting his public career of preaching and working miracles.¹⁴

In addition, folk wisdom for centuries had it that precocity was a bad omen. Erasmus in his *Adagia* cites the proverb, "I hate small boys who are wise before their time," from Apuleius, and amplifies it: "It was a common belief that prematurely wise boys either would not live long or else would lose their wits once they came to mature years."¹⁵ Similarly, Henry Cuffe, in *The Differences of the Ages of Mans Life* (1607), states confidently that "children that are too ripe witted in their childhood are for the most part either shortest lived, or else toward their old age most sottish, according to our Proverbe, *Soone ripe, soone rotten*."¹⁶ The word "precocious" is in fact coined from the Latin *praecoci-*, crude form of *praecox* (prematurely ripe), and thus etymologically suggests a fruit that ripens too fast and drops too soon.¹⁷

"Children in the Elizabethan age," opines Muriel St Clare Byrne, "as in the ages before it, were appreciated for their precocity rather than for the natural qualities of childhood." She continues:

They were regarded by the normal parent as miniature but troublesome men and women; the more nearly and the more quickly their mental growth and their behaviour approximated to the adult the more were they to be commended. Childhood, like the diseases incident to it, was a thing to be got over as soon as possible . . . It is much easier to understand and to

13. Burrow, p. 138.

14. Burrow, pp. 137–142

15. Quoted in Burrow, p. 147.

16. Quoted in Burrow, p. 145.

17. Walter W. Skeat, *The Concise Dictionary of English Etymology* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1993), p. 93.

appreciate the precocious and witty little boys of Shakespeare's plays if this is realized.¹⁸

This observation anticipates Philippe Ariès's (in)famous thesis on medieval and early modern childhoods, and, like it, Byrne's comment is in want of adequate substantiation and qualification.¹⁹ Kate Chedzoy has pursued the contrary thesis in her study of early modern drama:

Historians of childhood pursuing the path laid down by Philippe Ariès argue that early moderns effectively considered children as miniature adults . . . In contrast, child performers and the roles they played – whether in aristocratic domestic settings . . . or on the commercial stage . . . suggest that in fact Shakespeare and his contemporaries were both aware of the significant differences between children and adults, and had a sense that those differences could be labile and malleable.²⁰

At least, the idea about cultural preference for precocity does not square with the popularity of the proverb, “soon ripe, soon rotten.”²¹

Moreover, several precocious boys on the early modern stage are recognized and commented upon as such by other characters. Although such comments indicate mostly approbation and indulgence, they also show that precocity was to be particularly marked out, and did not belong to the general scheme of cultural expectations. In *Macbeth*, Macduff's young son goes on babbling about perjury and treachery and about his mother's prospects of remarriage in the case of his father's death. His mother calls him “poor monkey” (4.2.58) and “poor prattler” (4.2.63), indicating that whatever “wit” he possesses is insufficient to resist Macbeth's hostility in the absence of Macduff. Similarly, when the young Giovanni in John Web-

18. Muriel St. Clare Byrne, *Elizabethan Life in Town and Country* (London: Methuen, 1961), p. 196.

19. Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Vintage, 1962). Ariès's thesis is often simplified to suggest that children as a category did not exist in the Middle Ages, and that the idea of childhood emerged in the seventeenth century, that too only in the upper rungs of the society.

20. Kate Chedzoy, “Playing with Cupid: Gender, Sexuality, and Adolescence,” in *Alternative Shakespeares*, vol. 3 (London: Routledge, 2008), 138–157, p. 156.

21. In this context, one may recall the medieval custom of the boy bishop which lasted in some parts of England till the advent of Anglicanism. According to this popular custom, a boy from amongst the choristers was elected as the bishop for a fixed period of time (usually from the feast of St Nicholas to Holy Innocents' Day) and he performed all the Episcopal rites and offices except the mass. This ritual may be seen as a festive inversion of the hierarchy that reinforced the social norm, and did not signal a general empowerment of children.

ster's *The White Devil* (first performed 1612) appears in his new suit of armour and shows warlike attitudes, his father Bracchiano exclaims: "Forward lapwing! / He flies with the shell on's head" (2.1.126–127). Here he recalls the folk belief that the lapwing, a plover like bird, begins to fly even before it is properly hatched. However, despite his valour and wit Giovanni remains a child, at the mercy of the complex machinations in the adult world – until he emerges as the ceremonial dispenser of justice in the final scene.

It must be remembered that the word "precocious" is used almost exclusively of children and it has the effect of suggesting a half-baked, inadequate maturity. The staging of precocity can in fact accentuate the child-ness of the child characters. In what follows, child characters from two Shakespearean plays will be examined to see how their precocity (or lack thereof) is worked out in the performance-text and what responses it can possibly elicit from the audiences.

The reason for selecting *Richard III* and *King John* for review is that these plays have sizeable child roles which are often adequately varied and individuated. The present article will try to underscore the necessity of looking for multiple (and multiply accented) childhoods/child-nesses, and the diversity of their embodiments as well as representations. It also aims at recuperating the agencies (however rudimentary) embodied in such child characters, and in investigating how they extend or undercut any culturally and aesthetically predetermined topos of "innocence."

Richard III

The Tragedy of King Richard the Third (first performed 1592/93) has not one but five child characters. Let us begin with the more obscure ones. When "High-reaching Buckingham grows circumspect" about killing the princes at the Tower (4.2.32), the perturbed Richard enlists the counsel of his page.

KING RICHARD *Boy.*

PAGE My lord?

KING RICHARD Know'st thou not any whom corrupting gold

Would tempt unto a close exploit of death?

PAGE I know a discontented gentleman

Whose humble means match not his haughty spirit.

Gold were as good as twenty orators,

And will, no doubt, tempt him to anything.

KING RICHARD What is his name?

PAGE His name, my lord, is Tyrrel.

KING RICHARD I partly know the man. Go, call him hither, *boy.*

(4.2.33–41, my emphases)

This page has his origin in the “secrete page” of Richard as reported by Edward Hall in *The Union of the Two Noble . . . Famelies of Lancastre and Yorke* (1548):

Syr, quod the page, there lieth one in the palet chamber with out that I dare wel say, to do your grace pleasure the thing were right hard that he would refuse, meaning this by James Tirrel. The man had an high harte and sore longed upward . . . which thyng the page had well marked and knowen. . .²²

The counterpart of the page in the anonymous *The True Tragedy of Richard III* (printed 1594) has a notably longer role, and soliloquizes about his ambition and complicity in Richard’s plot.²³ How old is the page? Although Richard’s call of “boy” may only affirm the subordinate status of the page irrespective of his age, the idea of boyhood is generally associated with the office of the page. Belsey counts the page as a child, and it is likely that the role was originally essayed by a boy actor.²⁴ Therefore we have here a child who astutely observes the aspirations and motives of others, guides an adult immensely higher in rank and power, and is party to a heinous conspiracy. The Shakespeare play, like the historical account, represents the murderous counsel of the boy in a matter of fact way and thus the question of precocity or otherwise is not evoked. Critics have generally ignored this brief interaction. While this example does not indicate that it was natural for Shakespeare’s children to be precocious (to the point of planning murder in cold blood), it gestures towards the multiple, contingent experiences of boyhood in a climate of civil strife and political chicanery. Here Paul Griffiths’s observation may be of help: “Many different ways of growing up in early modern society . . . were affected by social class, gender, the state of labour markets, customary access to the land, and, above all, the responses of the young.”²⁵ It does prompt us to look beyond the simplistic paradigms of innocence and vulnerability dominantly linked with childhood.

Next, we have a pair of siblings – Clarence’s children, historically Edward (Earl of Warwick) and Margaret Plantagenet. They are designated by the speech prefixes as “Boy” and “Girl;” when they speak together they are called “Children.” This is the only case of a speaking female child (“Girl”) in the Shakespeare canon, and one will

22. Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, vol. 3 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), p. 278.

23. Bullough, vol. 3, p. 323.

24. Catherine Belsey, “Little princes: Shakespeare’s royal children,” in *Shakespeare and Childhood*, ed. Kate Chedzoy et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 32–48, p. 32.

25. Paul Griffiths, *Youth and Authority: Formative Experience in England, 1560–1640* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 6.

be hard put to find such characters in early modern drama as a whole. Richard has a plan for disposing of the aggrieved children: “Enquire me out some mean-born gentleman, / Whom I will marry straight to Clarence’ daughter. / The boy is foolish, and I fear not him” (4.2.55–57). The canonical age of marriage for girls was twelve full years, unless natural puberty set in earlier. The question of marriage suggests that the Girl is on the verge of puberty, but her speeches show that she is hardly a grown up. The same thing goes for her brother, who has longer speeches – they are not adequately individuated and together form a unit. At the beginning of the scene they are not sure about the fate of their father who has been killed at Richard’s behest, but they are observant enough to sense that something is amiss:

BOY Tell me, good grandam, is our father dead?
 Why do you wring your hands, and beat your breast,
 And cry ‘O Clarence, my unhappy son’?
 GIRL Why do you look on us and shake your head,
 And call us orphans, wretches, castaways,
 If that our noble father be alive? (2.2.1–7)

The Boy jumps to the conclusion that King Edward IV has killed their father, and the Girl seconds his theory, so that their grandmother has to warn them: “Peace, children, peace! the King doth love you well. / Incapable and shallow innocents, / You cannot guess who caused your father’s death” (2.2.17–19). The reason for the children’s hatred towards the King is that Richard has misled them. The Boy reports:

my good uncle Gloucester
 Told me, the king, provoked by the Queen [Elizabeth Woodeville],
 Devised impeachments to imprison him,
 And when my uncle told me so, he wept,
 And pitied me, and kindly kissed my cheek,
 Bade me rely on him as on my father,
 And he would love me dearly as his child. (2.2.20–26)

Think you my uncle did dissemble, grannam?
 . . .
 I cannot think it. (2.2.31–33)

This shows that the children are not mature enough to see through Richard’s tricks, and are easily swayed by him. Richard’s indoctrination is so strong that when Queen Elizabeth bursts into the scene, breaking the news of her widowhood, the children have no pity for her.

BOY Ah, aunt, you wept not for our father's death.
How can we aid you with our kindred tears?
GIRL Our fatherless distress was left unmoaned;
Your widow-dolour likewise be unwept. (2.2.62–65)

This sentiment may appear revolting since it goes against the pity and sensitivity we have come to associate with children. However, the grandmother does not chide them as precocious or un-childlike, and the play affords their lamentations/rejoinders the same situational validity as the utterances of the two adult women in the scene. The children then engage in an antiphony chant with Elizabeth, mocking her laments and aggressively putting forward their own.

QUEEN ELIZABETH Oh for my husband, for my dear lord Edward!
CHILDREN Oh for our father, for our dear lord Clarence!
...
QUEEN ELIZABETH What stay had I but Edward, and he's gone?
CHILDREN What stay had we but Clarence, and he's gone?
...
QUEEN ELIZABETH Was never widow had so dear a loss!
CHILDREN Were never orphans had so dear a loss! (2.2.71–78)

The Duchess of York, grandmother to the children and mother to Edward, Clarence and Richard, chips in, mourning for every one. What results is a patterned speech that critics have condemned as unbearable. The formalized, crude use of stichomythia suggests that realism is not intended in this exchange. Therefore, it is inadvisable to attempt a psychological investigation of the children and brand them as malapert and precocious. However, the scene unmistakably indicates how the children are drawn into the vortex of dynastic strife and how they imbibe hatred.

Next, we move to the princes in the Tower, celebrated as emblems of vulnerability. Although they appear on the stage for a small while, the princes are comparatively individuated. Readings of the play routinely pass over the witticisms of the boys and the verbal resistance they offer to Richard, probably because they do not square with the picture of innocent victimhood. However, their banter is shot through with immaturity and shallowness, which shows them to be children. Historically, Edward, Prince of Wales and his brother, the Duke of York were twelve and eleven respectively at the time of their disappearance.²⁶ But the proximity of York to his mother and grandmother suggests that in the play he is a smaller child, perhaps in petticoats like Mamillius. His mother and grandmother are concerned

26. Belsey, p. 43.

about his growth, but this becomes a subject of childish/childlike prattle for the boy (2.4.6–15).

Further, York plans to get even with his sarcastic uncle by using the legend that Richard was born with teeth – an evil omen, according to folk wisdom:

YORK Now, by my troth, if I had been remembered,
 I could have given my uncle's grace a *flout*,
 To touch his growth nearer than he touched mine.
 . . .
 Marry, they say my uncle grew so fast
 That he could gnaw a crust at two hours old.
 'Twas full two years ere I could get a tooth.
 Grannam, this would have been a *biting jest*. (2.4.23–30, my emphases)

His mother is alarmed at the sauciness of the boy and is quick to rebuke him: “A *parlous* boy! Go to, you are *too shrewd*” (2.4.35, emphases added), and reminds him that “Pitchers have ears” (2.4.37). It seems that York can afford to be facetious and cheeky at this point because he, unlike his mother and grandmother, totally fails to assess the threat posed by Richard.

In the next scene Prince Edward is introduced. Although he cannot be in control of the situation, he seems to have more depth and composure. In his first speech he refers to the arrests of his uncles and half-brothers during his journey to London: “our crosses on the way / Have made it tedious, wearisome, and heavy. / I want more uncles here to welcome me” (3.1.4–6). When Richard tells him that those uncles were false friends, Edward affirms: “God keep me from false friends! but they were none” (3.1.16). He can probably sense Richard’s machinations to some extent, but is not strong or resourceful enough to resist them. Moreover, he is eager to meet his brother York (3.1.20), ignorant of the fact that he can stay out of harm’s way if he remains in sanctuary.

When Richard announces that the two brothers will have to stay at the Tower before the coronation, Edward reacts intuitively, “I do not like the Tower of any place” (3.1.68). But he soon begins to talk about the connection of Julius Caesar with the Tower, which reveals him to be a sophomoric schoolboy. He asks Buckingham, “Is it upon record, or else reported / Successively from age to age, he [Julius Caesar] built it?” (3.1.72–73), and goes on to observe pontifically:

But say, my lord, it were not registered,
 Methinks the truth should live from age to age,
 As 'twere retailed to all posterity
 Even to the general all-ending day. (3.1.75–78)

This prompts Richard's snide aside: "So wise so young, they say, do never / live long" (3.1.78–79). Edward soon launches into another display of received wisdom:

That Julius Caesar was a famous man:
 With what his valour did enrich his wit,
 His wit set down to make his valour live.
 Death makes no conquest of this conqueror,
 For now he lives in fame, though not in life. (3.1.84–88)

This short speech contains such diverse figures of speech as prosopopeia, chiasmus, anadiplosis and polyptoton, which an early modern schoolboy would like to show off. He then speaks of another grandiose plan: "An if I live until I be a man, / I'll win our ancient right in France again, / Or die a soldier, as I lived a king" (3.1.91–93). This elicits another sarcastic rejoinder from Richard that foretells the fate of the boy: "Short summers lightly have a forward spring" (3.1.94). Edward's forays into the past introduce intriguing questions about the nature of historiography, but they are left tantalizingly open. Edward knows that (versions of) the past may be officially inscribed in the form of history ("upon record," "registered") or it may be transmitted as legend or hearsay: "Successively from age to age." But he does not make the inference that history might only be a narrative that is necessarily fashioned by political interests. He takes recourse to the essential humanist dictum that for a meritorious, enterprising hero like Julius Caesar oral report can make up for an absence of written record (ll. 75–78). Edward perhaps also knows that it was Julius Caesar himself who wrote the history of his conquests, *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* (ll. 84–86). But he does not show any sign of speculating that history might only be written by conquerors. These issues have a serious bearing on the representation of Richard III in Tudor historiography, and might lead to an interrogation of the official ideology. The questions could not be spelt out in a more concrete fashion, probably owing to strictures of censorship. By introducing the questions through the character of a pompous schoolboy, the playwright might have hinted that it is childish folly to accept official history (like the one the play itself was ostensibly replicating) without suspicion.

Soon the Duke of York enters the scene and straightaway engages in banter with Richard. He begins on the issue of growth, continuing from the previous scene, and tries to discomfit Richard (3.1.103–107). York then begins to irritate Richard by commenting on his dagger (3.1.110–125). This could be a sly reference to Richard's characteristic habit of fidgeting with his dagger that Hall has reported.²⁷ It is seen

27. Bullough, vol. 3, p. 300.

that Edward tries maturely to lighten up the situation during York's snide verbal attacks on Richard:

PRINCE EDWARD *My Lord of York will still be cross in talk. –
 Uncle, your grace knows how to bear with him.*
 YORK You mean, to bear me, not to bear with me. –
 Uncle, my brother mocks both you and me.
 Because that I am little, like an ape,
 He thinks that you should bear me on your shoulders.
 (3.1.126–131, my emphases)

Buckingham reacts thus to York's witticism:

With what a sharp-provided wit he reasons.
To mitigate the scorn he gives his uncle,
 He prettily and aptly taunts himself
So cunning and so young is wonderful. (3.1.132–135, my emphases)

Buckingham is perhaps aware that by calling himself an ape (a monkey) that Richard would bear, he is likening him to a fool – for jesters often bore monkeys on their backs. Besides, the shoulder-saddle would make them appear hunch-backed. Thus York's monkey-business may be a damaging allusion to Richard's well-known deformity.²⁸

Belsey has found the princes' verbal interventions radically significant in the scheme of the play. According to her,

For all Margaret's railing, it is the little princes who represent his [Richard's] most effective verbal opponents – until a grown man with an army comes to defeat him. . . . the princes represent a stage on the way to the autonomy of children. While their diction remains fairly simple, differentiating them from adults, their interventions are ironic, layered, ambiguous. Even though most of the audience would have known the outcome, a certain tension informs their struggle against Richard, not least thanks to the differences the play sets up between the princes. In the process it also invests the children with an independent role in the conflict, and childhood itself with concerns, capacities and responsibilities of its own.²⁹

While Belsey celebrates the agency of the children in this scene, one must realize that their autonomy is only provisional, restricted to verbal dexterity, and ulti-

28. Belsey, p. 45.

29. Belsey, p. 46.

mately unsuccessful against Richard's devious plans. Nevertheless, Richard has to grin and bear all the insults in this scene, and the symbolic value of his discomfiture can hardly be overruled. Only after the princes have left the stage does Richard call York "a parlous boy, / Bold, quick, ingenious, forward capable" (3.1.153–154) and trace his scorn to the training of his mother, Queen Elizabeth Woodville (3.1.155).

Despite all this ingenuity, York is too shallow to appreciate the danger awaiting them. He is afraid to go to the Tower only because he has heard that Clarence's angry ghost haunts it (3.1.144–145). He is surely not a *puer senex* capable of an instinctive judgment of the situation, and when he plays the gadfly he is far from a vatic commentator. Edward however maintains a more perceptive note, "I fear no uncle dead. / . . . an if they live, I *hope* I *need not* fear" (3.1.146–147, my emphases). In *The True Tragedy* the difference between the dispositions of the two princes is pointed out in a scene where Edward is gloomy about his captivity in the Tower, while York asks their keeper to tell a merry story (12.1251–1268).³⁰ In Shakespeare's play we do not see the princes after this. In Tyrrel's report of their murder, their individuality is ignored and they are typified as angelic babes (4.3.1–22). As in the case of Arthur, whom we shall take up shortly, the agency of children is ultimately made invisible in favour of a broad type-casting determined by the adult discourse. Children (even in representation) can find a life and voice of their own only in the interstices of adult concerns. What is fascinating is that the play seems to make this process obvious.

King John

In *King John* Arthur Plantagenet, Duke of Brittain, has almost seven times as many words as Mamillius, and therefore the character offers greater scope for analysis. However, the character appears in a play that has been described as "incoherent patchwork" with "wandering and uncertain" action,³¹ where much of the matter is left "scrappy, unemphatic, and poorly motivated."³² In keeping with the present critical climate, the episodic nature of the play is likely to be seen as underscoring its own theatricality, and exposing the ideological fault lines. Such a tendency is reflected by the following observation:

Separated from the temporal and genealogical chain that unites the two tetralogies, *King John* moves farthest back into the past, and the entire ac-

30. Bullough, vol. 3, p. 327.

31. E. A. J. Honigmann, Introduction, to *King John*, ed. E. A. J. Honigmann (London: Routledge, 1967), p. xxxi.

32. E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1944] 1969), p. 224.

tion seems designed to foreground every kind of moral and political and historiographic ambiguity. The providential justice that determines the outcome in *Richard III* is nowhere to be seen, and every attempt to resolve the action or make sense of it is immediately frustrated by the moral ambiguities of an episodic plot where success and failure ride on the shifting winds of chance.³³

One critic has gone so far as to call it “Shakespeare’s postmodern history play.”³⁴ Does this warrant us to expect that the play may put into relief the ideology informing the cultural definition of childhood and test its limits? While discussing Arthur and the possibilities of precocity in him, it is necessary to determine to what extent his lines contribute to a coherent, naturalistic portrayal of his character and to what extent they participate in (meta)theatrical stylization.

The Life and Death of King John (1596), assigned to Shakespeare, is inextricably linked with another play, the anonymous *The Troublesome Raigne of John, King of England* (1591; in two parts). The latter is thought to be the source of the Shakespearean play (the dominant opinion) or the corrupted version of an earlier play by Shakespeare.³⁵ In *The Troublesome Raigne* Arthur is an older and much more confident youth who is adamant about his political rights and participates as a soldier in the battle scenes. The historical Arthur Plantagenet (1187–1203) was in his early teens during his capture by the English in 1202. In *The Life and Death* he is a small, helpless child dependent on his mother Constance and his protector, King Philip of France. Louis, the French king’s son, was historically the same age as Arthur, but both plays show him as a mature, warlike young man. While *The Troublesome Raigne* calls him just “Lewes” he is anachronistically invested with the title of “Dauphin” in *The Life and Death* to give him the formidable status of the second-in-command of the anti-English forces. His is a youth that contrasts sharply with Arthur’s. Moreover, John’s successor, Henry III, according to Holinshed, was only nine years old when he came to the throne.³⁶ But as he appears in the final scene of *The Life and Death* he seems to be more composed and authoritative than Arthur.

33. Jean E. Howard, and Phyllis Rackin, *Engendering a Nation: A feminist account of Shakespeare’s English histories* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 119.

34. Virginia Mason Vaughan, “King John,” in *A Companion to Shakespeare’s Works: The Histories*, ed. Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 379–394, p. 379.

35. Tillyard, pp. 220–224; S. C. Sen Gupta, *Shakespeare’s Historical Plays* (London: OUP, 1964), pp. 98–99.

36. Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, vol. 4 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 48.

In the Shakespearean play Arthur speaks for the first time to thank his new champion, the Duke of Austria:

God shall forgive you Coeur-de-lion's death,
The rather that you give his offspring life,
Shadowing their right under your wings of war.
I give you welcome with a powerless hand,
But with a heart full of unstained love.
Welcome before the gates of Angers, Duke. (2.1.12–17)

Unlike Mamillius, Arthur speaks in long but well-constructed sentences with subordinate and co-ordinate clauses, and has the trick of stressing his own weakness. But his speech is treated as childlike, rather than precocious, by other characters on the stage. Although he touches upon the sensitive issue that Richard Coeur-de-lion, whose legacy he fights for, was killed by the Duke of Austria himself, his statement is not regarded as a diplomatic *faux pas*. Within the dramatic context it assumes an expository function and sets the stage for the killing of the Duke by Philip Falconbridge, Richard's valiant bastard. The King of France exclaims, "A noble boy. Who would not do thee right?" and the Duke of Austria kisses Arthur in recognition of his tender age: "Upon thy cheek lay I this zealous kiss / As seal to this indenture of my love" (2.1.18–20). In the same scene he is called (for example) "fair boy" (l.30), "little abstract [of his father Geoffrey]" (l.100), "child" (ll.159, 160), "poor boy" (l.166), "oppressed boy" (l.177), "green boy" (l.473) and "young Arthur" (l.552) – all epithets attesting to his tender age and vulnerability.

He plays a mute spectator when Queen Eleanor and Constance hold a slanging match over the competing claims of John and Arthur, respectively, to the English throne. Before the verbal bout has ended, he bursts out crying like a child (2.1.163–165). There is no reason to doubt his earnestness at this point. In the corresponding scene of *The Troublesome Raigne*, Part 1, Arthur speaks like a mature and observant man of the world who is fully conscious of his own prospects (2.440–450).³⁷ In the same scene he further argues astutely about law, which would be beyond the ken of his counterpart in the Shakespearean play:

But there was,³⁸ as sure there can be none,
The law intends such testaments as voyd,
Where right descent can no way be impeacht. (2.526–528)³⁹

37. Bullough, vol. 4, p. 84.

38. Richard's will making John king.

39. Bullough, vol. 4, p. 84.

Thus it may be inferred that *The Life and Death* tries to show Arthur as a young, vulnerable victim. In such a scheme, precocity or insolence would be against the intended pathos.

In Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (vol. 3, 1587 edition), one of the sources for both plays, there is an account of Arthur's defiance of John's counsel after his capture by the English.⁴⁰ This episode is concisely dramatized in *The Troublesome Raigne*, Part 1, where Arthur maintains: "Might hath prevayld not right, for I am King / Of England, though thou weare the Diadem" (9.1097–1098).⁴¹ But such defiance is conspicuously absent from *The Life and Death*, where Arthur has only two lines between Act 2, scene 1 and the famous blinding scene. First, he tries to console his mother in vain when she complains about the French King's betrayal: "I do beseech you, madam, be content" (3.1.42). Second, after being caught by the English at Mirabeau, he is anxious about his mother, "O, this will make my mother die with grief!" (3.3.5). It is thus seen that the Arthur of *The Life and Death* privileges familial bond and emotional attachment over political ambition. This feature comes to prominence in a skewed form in the blinding scene.

According to Holinshed, John's order for the blinding of Arthur was frustrated in the following manner:

through such resistances as he [Arthur] made against one of the tormentors that came to execute the kings commandment (for the other rather forsooke their prince and countrie, than they would consent to obeie the kings authoritie herein) and such lamentable words he uttered, Hubert de Burgh did preserve him from that injurie, not doubting but rather to have thanks than displeasure at the kings hands, for delivering him of such infamie as would have redounded unto his highnesse, if the young gentleman had been so cruellie dealt withal.⁴²

The two plays have dealt with the scene differently. In *The Troublesome Raigne*, Part 1, Arthur tries to dissuade Hubert through a mature and logical argument, pointing out that it was not only immoral but also a sin to obey the murderous command of a prince. Hubert raises the question of his loyalty to the sovereign in support of the commission of the crime – "My Lord, a subject dwelling in the land / Is tyed to execute the Kings command" (12.1391–1392; Bullough)⁴³ – to which Arthur replies that murder is against the universal commandment of God. Arthur's arguments and pleas are examples of consummate theatrical harangue:

40. Bullough, vol. 4, p. 84.

41. Bullough, vol. 4, p. 101.

42. Bullough, vol. 4, p. 33.

43. Bullough, vol. 4, p. 110

Hell, Hubert, trust me, all the plagues of hell
Hangs on performance of this damned deede.
This seale, the warrant of the bodies blisse,
Ensureth Satan chieftaine of thy soule:
Subscribe not Hubert, give not God's part away.
I speake not onely for eyes priviledge,
The chiefe exterior that I would enjoy:
But for thy perill, far beyond my paine,
Thy sweete soules losse, more than my eyes vaine lack;
A cause internall, and eternall too.
Advise thee Hubert, for the case is hard,
To loose salvation for a Kings reward. (12.1379–1390)⁴⁴

Thus the Arthur of *The Troublesome Raigne* tries to defend himself by appealing to reason and by striking eschatological terror into the heart of his persecutor. In sharp contrast, his counterpart in the Shakespearean play appeals solely to charity and affect. Even before he gets to know John's order, Arthur starts harping on his abject condition:

Mercy on me!
Methinks no body should be sad but I.
Yet, I remember, when I was in France,
Young gentlemen would be as sad as night
Only for wantonness. *By my christendom,*
So I were out of prison and kept sheep,
I should be as merry as the day is long;
And so I would be here, but that I doubt
My uncle practises more harm to me.
He is afraid of me and I of him.
Is it my fault that I was Geoffrey's son? (4.1.12–22, my emphases)

He adds to greater effect: "No, indeed, is't not; and I would to heaven / I were your son, so you would love me, Hubert" (4.1.23–24). Hubert is shaken by what he calls Arthur's "innocent prate" (4.1.25), and the boy further reinforces his discomfiture:

Are you sick, Hubert? you look pale today.
In sooth, I would you were a little sick,
That I might sit all night and watch with you.
I warrant I love you more than you do me. (4.1.28–31)

44. Bullough, vol. 4, pp. 109–110.

Arthur's care and love for Hubert seem to be selfless at this point, and makes for dramatic irony. However, soon after he learns about Hubert's compulsion to carry out John's order, Arthur takes into account past acts of solicitude for Hubert and capitalizes on them to stir up pity:

Have you the heart? When your head did but ache
 I knit my handkerchief about your brows,
 The best I had – *a princess wrought it me*,
 And I did never ask it you again –
 And with my hand at midnight held your head,
 And like the watchful minutes to the hour
 Still and anon cheer'd up the heavy time,
 Saying, 'What lack you?' and 'Where lies your grief?'
 Or 'What good love may I perform for you?'
Many a poor man's son would have lien still
 And ne'er have spoke a loving word to you,
 But you *at your sick service had a prince*. (4.1.41–52, my emphases)

Curiously, Arthur, a few lines earlier, was eager to relinquish his princely origin in favour of the simpler and freer bucolic life. Now he emphasizes his pedigree to show that he had disregarded feudal hierarchy and stooped below his rank to succour Hubert. Thus he tries to highlight his benevolence and raise the value of the favours he had done to Hubert. Such strategic reinterpretation of past acts and their deployment for present contingencies are not in keeping with the temperament of a simple, guileless child. Is Arthur then inherently (or precociously) politic and opportunistic? Were his past favours to Hubert (Hubert does not deny them) calculated measures meant for gaining influence over a powerful and potentially antagonistic adult? What is more intriguing is that Arthur himself is aware of these possibilities, and he articulates them cannily in the process of pleading with Hubert:

Nay, you may think my love was crafty love,
And call it cunning. Do, an if you will.
 If heaven be pleased that you must use me ill,
 Why then you must. Will you put out mine eyes?
 These eyes that never did nor never shall,
 So much as frown on you? (4.1.53–58, my emphases)

This self-consciousness and circumspection suggest that Arthur is far from a naïve, immature child. In the light of this revelation, one might surmise whether his other arguments and pleadings are desperate devices hastily formulated under the shadow of an impending danger, or whether they are equally crafty tactics.

He uses various strategies to evade the gruesome sentence. He invents one excuse after another to defer the blinding. First, he requests that Hubert send away the Executioner and promises to stay silent and calm.

Alas, what need you be so boisterous-rough?
I will not struggle, I will stand stone-still.
For heaven sake, Hubert, let me not be bound.
Nay, hear me, Hubert, drive these men away,
And I will sit as quiet as a lamb;
I will not stir, nor wince, nor speak a word,
Nor look upon the iron angerly.
Thrust but these men away, and I'll forgive you,
Whatever torment you do put me to. (4.1.75–83, my emphases)

But when the Executioner says that he is pleased to be away from such a deed, Arthur discovers in him a sympathetic soul and reverses his request:

Alas, I then have chid away my friend!
He hath a stern look, but a gentle heart.
Let him come back, that his compassion may
Give life to yours. (4.1.86–89, my emphases)

Arthur then tries to stop Hubert from blinding him by trying to arouse in him an empathic imagination:

O heaven, that there were but a mote in yours [eyes],
A grain, a dust, a gnat, a wandering hair,
Any annoyance in that precious sense,
Then feeling what small things are boisterous there,
Your vile intent must needs seem horrible. (4.1.91–95, my emphases)

Hubert has to rebuke him at this point: “Is this your promise [of keeping quiet]? Go to, hold your tongue!”(4.1.96) The prospect of imminent blinding (and perhaps consequent death) is not supposed to bring out the best in anybody, especially a child; but a character on the early modern stage can adopt the stance of equanimity or *sprezzatura* in the face of calamity. Arthur does not take the route of nobleness and decorum (which would be in keeping with the training and comportment of an aristocratic warrior) and explores all avenues to find respite. Following Hubert’s rebuke, he requests that his tongue be cut and eyes preserved (4.1.97–102). Moreover, he repeatedly describes the iron poker and the fire as sentient beings that take pity on him, thus trying to embarrass Hubert for his cruelty:

The iron of itself, though heat red-hot,
 Approaching near these eyes, would drink my tears,
 And quench his fiery indignation
 Even in the matter of mine innocence;
 Nay, after that, consume away in rust
 But for containing fire to harm mine eye.
 Are you more stubborn-hard than hammered iron? (4.1.61–67)

An if you do [rekindle the fire], you will but make it blush
 And glow with shame of your proceedings, Hubert.
 Nay, it perchance will sparkle in your eyes
 And like a dog that is compelled to fight,
 Snatch at his master that doth tarre him on.
 All things that you should use to do me wrong
 Deny their office; only you do lack
 That mercy which fierce fire and iron extends,
 Creatures of note for mercy-lacking uses. (4.1.111–120)

This is not childish prattle, but consistent and well-developed, if far-fetched, argument that may remind one of a Metaphysical conceit. Of all the ruses and strategies that Arthur adopts to avoid being blinded the hyperbolic, prosopopeic invocation of the iron seems to us to be the most embarrassingly affected, and it does not have any viability outside the context of theatre. Curiously, while all other tactics fail, the persistent contrasting of Hubert with the kind, sympathetic iron finally manages to dissuade him from harming Arthur. The boy greets his decision with a pithy rhetorical flourish, unlike a child: “O, now you look like Hubert! all this while / You were disguised” (4.1.125–126).

The complexity and precocity of Arthur’s pleas become apparent when compared with the simple but strong petition that the boy Edmond, Earl of Rutland, makes in *3 Henry VI (The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York and the Good King Henry the Sixth)* to escape the murderous wrath of Clifford:

Thou hast one son – for his sake pity me,
 Lest in revenge thereof, sith God is just,
 He be as miserably slain as I.
 Ah, let me live in prison all my days
 And when I give occasion of offence,
 Then let me die, for now thou hast no cause. (1.3.41–46)

However, Hubert does not regard Arthur's speeches as precocious, and the play implicitly invites its audiences to participate in his decision. This is how he reassures Arthur after sparing his eyes: "pretty child, sleep doubtless and secure / That Hubert, for the wealth of all the world, / Will not offend thee" (4.1.129–131). Thus it is clear that the play does not project Arthur as a *puer senex* or a precocious brat; he remains a "sweet child" despite his tortuous and fantastic supplications. It is probable that for the contemporary audiences Arthur's speeches might work as an extradiegetic exercise of great aesthetic appeal, rather than prove an irrelevant, implausible excrescence. Tillyard spells out their peculiar attraction:

In itself the business over Arthur's body [in Act 4, scene 3] is superb, but its energy and its freedom of style are quite alien to Arthur pleading with Hubert for his sight. This pleading is usually praised as very pathetic or condemned as intolerably affected. It is indeed affected, but to an Elizabethan audience would not have been intolerable. They probably enjoyed it as an exhibition of rhetoric; and as such it is finely built up, an elegant exercise into word-play, like many other scenes in Shakespeare. It does not, however, square very well with the more vigorous excesses of language [as exemplified by the Bastard] . . . in fact it does not fit naturally into the play at all.⁴⁵

Thus the latitudes of episodic dramaturgy, together with the aesthetics of the early modern stage, justify Arthur's rhetorical manipulations without branding him as precocious. But this particular example does not enable us to return a general verdict upon the cultural-historical attitude towards children and precocity in general.

The words of Arthur before jumping from the walls of the prison are more realistic, but not altogether shorn of rhetorical trappings. In *The Troublesome Raigne*, Part 2, Arthur has to make up his mind before attempting the perilous jump, and his deliberation with himself is captured in a soliloquy:

Now helpe good hap to further mine entent,
Crosse not my youth with any more extreames:
I venter life to gaine my libertie,
And if I die, worlds trouble have an end.
Feare gins diswade the strength of my resolve,
My holde will faile, and then alas I fall,
And if I fall, no question death is next:
Better desist, and live in prison still.

45. Tillyard, p. 238.

Prison said I ? nay, rather death than so:
 Comfort and courage come againe to me.
 Ile venter sure; tis but a leape for life. (1.1–11)⁴⁶

In the corresponding soliloquy in *The Life and Death*, Arthur tries to escape disguised as a ship-boy and has a fatal fall:

The wall is high, and yet will I leap down:
 Good ground, be pitiful and hurt me not!
There's few or none do know me: if they did,
This ship-boy's semblance hath disguised me quite.
 I am afraid; and yet I'll venture it.
 If I get down, and do not break my limbs,
 I'll find a thousand shifts to get away:
 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*] (4.3.1–10)

Arthur in *The Troublesome Raigne* has a longer and more declamatory swan song, which tries to exaggerate the pathos. On the other hand, Arthur's speech in *The Life and Death*, though succinct, exhibits the same trick of personification which he successfully used in the case of the blinding iron. Here, he addresses the ground and craves its pity. When he gets injured he discovers his uncle's malicious, death-dealing disposition in the rocks. Actually, the historical Arthur's disappearance was shrouded in mystery, and there are many competing opinions about the manner of his death. In these two plays, Arthur's rash attempt at jumping out of prison is implicitly traced to desperation and frustration. But if we try to analyze the character of Arthur in *The Life and Death* from a realistic point of view and look for psychological coherence, he does not appear to be an innocent, angelic child that the other characters in the play take him to be. First, he has the instinct and intelligence to apprehend that King John is antagonistic to his life (which shows him to be more mature than Edward and York of *Richard III*). Second, although he resists the attempt to blind him with verbal manoeuvres and elicits a promise of safety from Hubert, Arthur does not trust him at all. That is why he takes the risk of jumping from the walls of the prison. Third, he has the astuteness to disguise himself as a lowly ship-boy lest he should be caught after escaping from captivity (the play does not try to explain how he got the ship-boy's costume inside the prison).

In *The Life and Death*, in the same scene where Arthur jumps to death, Pembroke, Salisbury and Bigot decry his supposed murder in hyperbolic terms and ex-

46. Bullough, vol. 4, p. 120.

plot it as a reason for rebelling against John. The Bastard, who is the fiercest loyalist of the king, attacks Hubert for the putative murder of Arthur with equally high-flown rhetoric:

Thou'rt damned as black – nay nothing is so black –
Thou art more deep damned than Prince Lucifer;
There is not yet so ugly a fiend of hell
As thou shalt be, if thou didst kill this child. (4.3.122–125)

The adults who vociferously lament Arthur's death are not in a position to know his cunning dealings with Hubert inside the prison. The play does hardly anything to dispel the sympathy conclusively accorded to the boy. The fact remains that the problematic aspect of Arthur's character has not received much critical attention, and he has not been described as precocious and un-childlike because of this. However, as has been indicated earlier, this does not warrant our forming a generalized picture about childhood and precocity in early modern England or in the Shakespeare's corpus. Does the play incorporate the contradictions in the characterization of Arthur consciously, and does it call upon the audiences to regard them seriously? Does it try to test the limits and possibilities of the dominant cultural formulations of childhood? Which is to say, can Arthur be a shrewd survivalist and still be a childlike child? Or does the lack of concern about the individuality and interiority of Arthur replicate a pan-historic, essentialist definition of children as passive, predetermined bearers of adult signification? In the Arthur of *The Life and Death* we may locate a boy who, by our standards, deviates from the ideal of the innocent, pure child, but who is recognized only as the archetypal "sweet child" by his elders and betters.

This predetermined *telos* of the character within the adult discourse of the play has the effect of denying agency and interiority to Arthur, especially when we recall that much of his un-childlike acts are designed to cope with a hostile adult world. The accusation of precocity is usually designed to curb the resisting agency of unruly children and to make them comply with adult norms; but at the same time the refusal to acknowledge the adult-like parts of children can be equally disempowering for them – and for the sign of the child in general. One suspects that that is what has happened to Arthur and several other children in the ideological scheme of the plays in which they occur and in the history of their reception. The act of attentively reading these characters may help tease out the layers of political investment that condition the representation (and formulation) of the child. The initial concern of the article, that of contextualizing and historicizing the child characters in Shakespeare without summarily dismissing them as precocious or otherwise, is thus not devoid of a broader cultural valence.