

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



‘The Truth Should Live from Age to Age’: Child Ciphers in *Richard III* and Elizabethan Civic Pageantry

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The tragic power of murdered children—spectacles that invoke a cathartic pity or an indignant anger—has proven a subject of enduring interest among Shakespeareans.¹ Arlin Hiken famously described the death of a child as an axis about which the threnodic wheel of a play turns; a dead or mutilated child plunges the play into a ‘liminal state’ that signifies the ‘destruction of order and a descent into chaos.’² In *Macbeth* the death of the courageous young Macduff, although it happens offstage, often strikes the audience as Macbeth’s most outlandish misdeed. In *The Life and Death of King John*, the death of Arthur and the pathetic spectacle of his pleas to Hubert (who we remember coming to put out Arthur’s eyes with a hot iron) seem a last straw that denudes King John of the right to rule.³ In the case of the young princes of *The Tragedy*

¹ For more recent readings of Shakespeare’s children as tragic spectacles, see Catherine Belsey, *Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 102; Warren Chernaik, ‘Dying Young: Shakespeare’s Children’ *English*, 62. 237 (2013), 103-26, (p. 120). John Staines has also described the role of Shakespeare’s children as tragic spectacles, but adds a wrinkle to the reading by closely examining audience responses to spectacles of violence—particularly the violence of *Lear*. The results point to a socio-political reading of spectacle in which ‘pity can become the radical spur to action’, a pregnant possibility for reading *Richard III*. See John Staines, ‘Radical Pity: Responding to Spectacles of Violence in *King Lear*’ in *Staging Pain: 1580-1800, Violence and Trauma in British Theatre*, ed. by James Allard (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 75-92 (p. 76).

² Arlen Hiken ‘Shakespeare’s Use of Children’, *Education and Theatre Journal* 15.3 (1963), 241-8 (p. 243).

³ Even more interesting, in *The Life and Death of King John* an attentive reader may sense Shakespeare emotionally stacking the deck, decreasing the age of Arthur to be sure that his audience identified him as a child. In 1909 F.M. Powicke was already making the case for a more sympathetic reading of King John, noting along the way that primary source material available to Shakespeare describes Arthur dying at the age of sixteen. See F.M. Powicke, ‘King John and Arthur of Brittany’, *The English Historical Review*, 24.

of *Richard III*, an awareness of their role as innocents murdered in the Tower does not seem to stop an informed audience from anxiously hoping that they may yet survive; indeed, the interest in the exhumation and analysis of the princes that followed the 2012 discovery of Richard of Gloucester's remains at Greyfriars in Leicester seems to borrow something of the same imaginative impulse, a hoping against history that a new fate can be found for these child-princes.⁴

While inquiry into the princes' tragic death in the Tower has unearthed valuable insights and historicised their performance on the stage, it has also occluded readings of the princes as more than tragic spectacles.⁵ Although the princes of *Richard III* are famous and archetypal victims, they do far more than simply die; they become loaded symbols of legitimacy, of simplicity and of sincerity that point to an underground oral narrative of honest historiography that will vilify Richard's crimes. Children juxtaposed to the sovereign invoked a rhetorical construct implying responsibility on the part of the monarch to treat his or her subjects as their *natural* children according to an idealised system of familial affections. This theoretical relationship between children and the sovereign, which had clear ceremonial precedents in the reign of Elizabeth Tudor, allowed the children of *Richard III* to become representatives of repressed narratives, speakers of truth to power. Thus Richard, even while he usurps the sovereign power of Prince Edward, cannot shield himself from the self-referential implications of the play—that the dead princes in the tower will not be forgotten, and that the truth will, in the words of Prince Edward, 'live from age to age' (III.i.76).

I: Cipher Children and their Parents (Sovereigns) in Civic Pageantry

As a window into the early modern representation of children as *ciphers*, it might be well to consider a tableau from the coronation pageant of Mary Tudor—a tableau that has been called the pageant's 'child-angel putto.' This highly visible symbol, a child-like angel placed above the pageant base, had a curious function as simultaneous

96 (1909), 659-74 (p. 659). *The Troublesome Raigne of King John*, an earlier version of the myth, portrays Arthur as a capable young man, not the distraught spectacle of *The Life and Death of King John*.

⁴ Surely some hint into the cultural currency wielded by the prince's fate was signified by the 2013-14 petition to subject the bodies buried at Westminster to DNA testing. The petition closed months before its proposed date of completion, but can still be viewed at <<http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk/petitions/45769>> [accessed: 14/03/2014].

⁵ Warren Chernaik's recent article, for example, has connected Shakespeare's propensity to kill off children to the (contested) cultural work performed by high early modern infant mortality rates. Chernaik argues that dying young was 'a fact of life, not to be avoided' that could be played upon to occasion a deep sense of reflective sorrow. See Chernaik, 'Dying Young,' p.126).

adornment and mouthpiece. As a contemporary description avers, ‘when [a] trumpeter, who stode secretly in the pageant, ded blow his trompet, the angel dyd put his trompet to his mowth, as though it should be he that blewe the same, to the marveling of many ignorant persons.’⁶ In the child-angel-putto, the figure of a child becomes a cipher, an elaborate construct that relays the sounds created by someone else. A child in the position of this putto could not be held responsible for the sounds it appeared to make because all but ‘ignorant persons’ recognised its function as a cipher.

Working from a dense textual overlay of prescriptive and descriptive early modern texts, Michael Witmore has documented a broader representative tendency for which the above putto is metonymic—a tendency to read children as ‘reflex arcs’ vulnerable to ‘the immediacy of the passions that govern their appetites...with an almost mechanical invariability.’⁷ This body of literature presented children as spontaneous reactors, creatures of a proverbial simplicity that minimised their personal culpability and left them open to the manipulation of external political forces. It is the contention of this essay that this reading of early modern childhood also enabled children to speak truth to power, a prerogative evinced by early modern civic pageantry and dramatised in Shakespeare’s *Richard III*.

By the time of the likely composition of *Richard III*, English sovereigns had long represented themselves as the parents of the state, a rhetorical move that had potent metaphorical remainders.⁸ It may be well here to remember that a substantial body of prescriptive early modern literature treated parenthood as a cultural fixture that ought to engender natural affections.⁹ As Bruce Young notes, these natural affections had

⁶ Michael Witmore, *Pretty Creatures: Children and Fiction in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell, 2007), p. 81. My reading of child-ciphers here is an adaptation of Witmore’s central thesis in *Pretty Creatures*. Witmore argues that these arrangements had a curious effect on the pageant, as the children’s ‘relatively insubstantial voices and bodies... belonged to an ontologically distinct zone, one in which the usual constraints of size and motion did not apply.’ See Witmore, p. 67. A child’s body, thus demarcated a distinct place ruled by unconventional laws that allowed unusual symbolic depictions of the sovereign in a subordinate position. Children could perform in a symbolically superior position to that of the sovereign without giving offense, since as the genius of a city or region they were clearly present as *representations*, not as individuals.

⁷ Witmore, pp. 69-70.

⁸ For some analysis of James Stuart’s frequent invocation of the notion of the sovereigns as a parent of the state, see Howard Marchitello, ‘*Pater Patriae*: James I and the Imprint of Prerogative’, in *Printing and Parenting in Early Modern England*, ed. by Douglas A. Brooks, (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 303-25 (p. 309).

⁹ For the present, early modern England’s tendency to expect a kind of natural affection between parents and children may be considered a firmly rooted starting point, not contested critical ground. See Bruce Young, ‘*King Lear* and the Calamity of Fatherhood’ in *In the Company of Shakespeare: Essays On*

consistent associations with good parenthood, as good parenting was associated with ‘kindness, nurturing and generous self-giving.’¹⁰ Equally ubiquitous, perhaps, were references to children as mirrors or facsimiles of their parents. As Barbara Estrin has demonstrated, children often became symbols of the future, reflecting their parents’ origins and affirming the ‘totality of their parents’ existence in the abiding legacy of continued generations.’¹¹

The assumption that an ideal sovereign ought to be the possessor of natural, familial affections for their subjects had sustained cultural capital throughout the lifetime of Elizabeth I.¹² Recent secondary literature has made much of the queen ‘flying in the face of a patrilineal tradition’ by employing her virginity as a rhetorical device.¹³ Indeed, Stephen Greenblatt has grandly asserted that, from Elizabeth I’s first address to Parliament, ‘the secular cult of the virgin was born.’¹⁴ It should not, however, go unnoticed that Elizabeth I also took pains to describe herself as a *mother* of the state. The rhetorical device of motherhood provided the queen with useful cognitive associations, a figure of female authority in a male-dominated country, with the weight of the Fifth Commandment at her call.¹⁵ This explains the queen’s oft-noted 1563 reply to the Commons’ request that she marry, where she regales the Commons with the assurance that, ‘though after my death you may have many stepdames, yet shall you never have any a more mother than I mean to be unto you all.’¹⁶ Notably stripped of any reference to virginity, this rhetorical flourish simultaneously consoled her subjects with the implication of an idealised parent/child relationship and asserted the queen’s authority to do precisely what she wanted.

Renaissance Literature in Honor of G. Blakemore Evans, ed. by Thomas Moisan and Douglas Bruster, (Massachusetts: Rosemont, 2002), pp. 43-64 (p. 46); Deborah Shuger, *Habits of Thought in The English Renaissance: Religion, Politics, and The Dominant Culture*, (Berkeley: California UP, 1990), p. 219.

¹⁰ Young, p. 46.

¹¹ Barbara Estrin, *The Raven and the Lark: Lost Children in Literature of the English Renaissance*, (Toronto: Associated UP, 1985), pp. 19-20.

¹² Lea Della Cogna chronicles Thomas Dekker’s attempt in *The Wonderful Year* as one of the earliest to cover the queen with the mantle of the Virgin Mary—a virgin that became the mother of something larger than an individual. See Lea Della Cogna, “‘God Save Our Gracious Queen;’ Elizabeth I and Victoria: the Virgin Queen and the Queen Mother”, *Textus: English Studies in Italy*, 19.2 (2006), 371-86 (pp. 377-8).

¹³ Cogna, p. 373. See also Mary Beth Rose’s article on the gendering of the Queen’s rhetoric in her recorded public addresses, ‘The Gendering of Authority in the Public Speeches of Elizabeth I,’ *MLA*, 115.5 (2000), 1077-82 (pp. 1077-8).

¹⁴ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980) p. 186.

¹⁵ See Helen Hackett, *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen*, (New York: St. Martins, 1995), p. 77.

¹⁶ See Elizabeth Tudor, ‘Answer to the Commons’ Petition that She Marry,’ in *Elizabeth I and Her Age*, ed. by Donald Stump and Susan M. Felch, (New York: Norton, 2009), pp. 127-28 (p. 128).

As with any metaphor, however, the metaphor of the queen as the mother of the state had a remainder—in this case the idea that a parent ought to be affectionate, generous and self-sacrificing. The queen’s subjects quickly realised this rhetorical device could be employed to raise uneasy questions or address taboo subjects. This new rhetorical weapon, speaking to the queen (and a barren queen at that) from the emotionally loaded platform of her children, appeared with some consistency in the queen’s civic progresses. The queen used the civic progresses as ‘enormously successful and long-running stage show with [her] as its star’.¹⁷ More to the point, the great pageants were public theatre, sure to be copied down, printed and talked over at length; they were opportunities for subjects to interlocate with the queen in a manner and from a platform difficult to imagine elsewhere.

The 1559 coronation pageant showcases the earliest examples of this rhetorical trope to be found in the reign of Elizabeth I.¹⁸ Three separate accounts of the queen’s coronation pageant exist, and Sandra Logan has argued that they represent differently motivated attempts at reinventing the event. Their authors include Richard Mulcaster, Il Schifanoia, the petulant Mantuan ambassador to England, and Henry Machyn, a London tailor. As the most detailed and informed account, Mulcaster’s description of the pageant sheds the most light on the juxtaposition of children and the queen, although it also deserves some circumspection.¹⁹ As one of the pageant’s organisers, his

¹⁷ Richard McCoy, “‘The Wonderful Spectacle’: The Civic Progress of Elizabeth I and the Troublesome Coronation’ in *Coronations; Medieval and Early Modern Monarchic Ritual*, ed. by Janos M. Bak (Berkeley, California UP, 1990) pp. 217-227 (p. 224). Arthur Wilson’s *History* provided one kind of evidence that successive generations contrasted James Stuart and Elizabeth Tudor’s participation in the coronation progresses, arguing that their different approaches to the progress evidenced the queen’s humility and affection in opposition to James I’s haughty derision. See *The History of Great Britain Being the Life and Reign of King James the First, Relating to What Passed from His First Access to The Crown* (London: Richard Lounds, 1653) pp. 12-13. Wing (CD Rom 1996) W2888.

¹⁸ This should not imply that the coronation pageant was unique in its inclusion of child actors. Indeed, as David Bergeron has argued, child actors were common participants in all kinds of civic pageants, not only those that showcased the sovereign. See David Bergeron, “Actors in English Civic Pageants”, *Renaissance Papers* (1972), 17-28 (pp. 18-19). Future research might also consider the queen’s appreciation for boy companies, which E. K. Chambers memorably argued had ‘dominated’ the early years of the queen’s court. See E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, Volume 2 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1923), p. 7. See also Jeanne H. McCarthy, ‘Elizabeth I’s “Picture in Little”: Boy Company Representations of a Queen’s Authority’, *Studies in Philology*, 100.4 (2003), 425-462 (pp. 426-8).

¹⁹ See Sandra Logan, ‘Making History: The Rhetorical and Historical Occasion of Elizabeth Tudor’s Coronation Entry,’ *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 31.2 (2001) 251-82 (p. 252). Machyn’s journal entry is only a page long and does not depict any particular insight into the workings of the pageant, implying he may have worked from second-hand sources. The disgruntled Il Schifanoia

admittedly rosy account sometimes displays the agonistic self-affirmation of a committed partisan reviewing the first performance of their own play. Mulcaster's introduction, for example, glosses the pageant as 'a stage wherein was showed the wonderful spectacle of a noble-hearted princess toward her most loving people and the people's exceeding comfort in beholding so worthy a sovereign.'²⁰ Language such as this, which insists on an idealised relationship between a worthy sovereign and cheerful populace, practically begs contemporary criticism to fill in the shadows around the rather two-dimensional picture it paints.

The temptation to ignore Mulcaster's description, however, or to insist that it disguised the activities of the pageants in accordance with a more preferable political narrative, must be qualified. Although the queen may have employed by indirect means the full royal arsenal of soft power to control the pageant's narrative, the occasion of the pageant still called for the sovereign *to be acted upon* by her subjects. The very structure of the pageant called for an interlocution that presented a certain subsection of the people of London with an opportunity to give their queen some advice.

The citizens of London tended to deliver taboo advice through the medium of children, creating the odd spectacle of a queen shuffled from place to place to receive poetic lectures from precocious and diminutive moralists. Harold Hillebrand was among the first to note the importance of children in Elizabethan pageantry, claiming that they have a 'general' and 'necessary' presence in official progresses, pageants, and the coronation ceremony of Elizabeth herself.²¹ Shepherding the arrival of the queen at first one location and then another, at times they seem like early modern talk show hosts. Mulcaster's chronicle of the procession lists nine separate occasions on which the city thrust forward children to speak to the sovereign on its behalf. More detailed consideration of a few of these addresses to their interactions with the sovereign demonstrates just how charged their roles as ciphers could be. The first, a child

himself was probably an eyewitness to only certain parts of the ceremonies, unless he rode with the royal entourage towards which he shows a remarkable distaste as evidenced by his January 23rd missive to Mantua, which begins 'I suppose your Lordship will have heard of the farce performed in the presence of her Majesty on the day of the Epiphany, and I have not sufficient intellect to interpret it.' See Logan, 262. This leaves Mulcaster as both the most complete and informed chronicler of the coronation pageant, although as a participant in the pageant's organization he could not be called impartial.

²⁰ Richard Mulcaster, 'From The Passage of Our Most Dread Sovereign Lady, Queen Elizabeth,' in *Elizabeth I and Her Age*, ed. by Donald Stump and Susan Felch (New York: Norton, 2009) pp. 91-108 (p. 92). Further references to this edition are provided after quotations in the text.

²¹ Harold Hillebrand, *Child Actors: A Chapter in Elizabethan Stage History*, (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964), p. 29. See also Allison Machlis Meyer, 'Richard III's Forelives: Rewriting Elizabeth(s) in Tudor Historiography', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 26 (2013), 156-83 (p. 156).

‘appointed to welcome the Queen’s Majesty in the whole City’s behalf,’ greeted the Queen with four stanzas of thanksgivings, blessings, and a youthful *encomium* (92).²² The queen then addresses the child as a representative of the public, claiming that his words ‘were most heartily pronounced by the child as from all the hearts of her most hearty citizens’ (93). From the outset of the pageant, children were identified as symbols or representatives of the city.

The next child appears in the midst of an unusual tableau with dramatic political tensions. The tableau held up figures of Henry VII and his wife Elizabeth holding hands. Mulcaster notes, ‘out of the forepart of this pageant was made a standing for a child,’ who loudly declared unto the queen ‘the whole meaning of the said pageant’ (93). The child’s verses read

Therefore as civil war and shed of blood did cease,
When these two houses were united into one
So now that jar shall stint and quietness increase
We trust, O noble Queen, thou wilt be cause alone (94).

This War of the Roses tableau may not assert any particularly controversial political positions—civil war has never been a favourite of any monarch. But the actions of the children surrounding this moment of proto-political discourse point to their importance within the coronation procession and place them in the unusual position of providing remonstrance to the sovereign. The queen closes the tableau by responding favourably. She thanks the city (assuming the child to be a metonymic representative of the city) and ‘promised that she would do her whole endeavor for the continual preservation of concord, as the pageant did import’ (94).

The third child tableau ratchets up the political tensions by placing a child in the allegorical position of the sovereign astride an evocative ‘Seat of Worthy Governance’. Mulcaster describes this tableau as,

Representing her Majesty’s person placed in a seat of government, supported by certain virtues...The Seat of Worthy Governance, which seat was made in such artificial manner as, to the appearance of the lookers on, the forepart seemed to have no stay, and therefore of force was stayed by lively personages...virtues, namely Pure Religion, Love of Subjects, Wisdom, and Justice (96).

²² Mulcaster, p. 92.

The subjects, embodied as virtues, hold aloft an idealised seat of government stabilised only by their physical presence, and upheld by indicative virtues with potentially controversial resonances. The term Love of Subjects carries an ambiguous and perhaps intentional double meaning: both the subjects' love of their monarch and the monarch's love of his or her subjects. To seal the allegory, the child recites to Elizabeth I the lines 'Now all thy subjects' hearts, O Prince of peerless fame, / Do trust these Virtues shall maintain up thy throne' (92). Of course, the implication that thunders in the silence following these words is that if these virtues do not maintain the queen's throne, it will fall. It must have seemed prudent to allow a child to deliver those lines.

The fourth tableau depicts another potentially problematic relationship between the sovereign and her subjects. At 'a little conduit in Cheap,' a child representing Truth, whom Mulcaster has airily allegorised as the daughter of Time, meets the queen holding 'a book in her hand upon which was written, *verbum veritatis*, the Word of Truth' (99-100). She recites to the queen,

We trust, O worthy Queen, thou wilt this Truth embrace...
Which thing the book of Truth doth teach in writing plain
She doth present to thee the same, O worthy Queen,
For that that words do fly but writing doth remain (100).

The obvious allegory of this tableau displays the city of London presenting its sovereign with a Bible, quite literally cast as the very words of truth, an obvious and profound locus of political power.²³ Moreover, the discursive 'we trust' that keeps cropping up in these speeches has by now merited a closer look. As an expression, the children's repetitive 'we trust' does not only express trust; it also recommends a course of action. Perhaps more importantly, it implies that the trust is not so secure as to go unmentioned.

The queen's behaviour surrounding the child Truth demonstrates that she recognised this tableau for what it was, and sought to control her own image within that sphere. Upon learning that this Bible should be presented to her by a child with an accompanying speech, Elizabeth I thanked the City for that gift and said that she would oftentimes read over that book, 'commanding Sir John Perrot...to go before and to receive the book' (98-9). Here the queen inserts a proxy, revising the visual imagery of the pageant to keep from being placed in the unseemly or subordinate position of

²³ Susan Frye has read this scene as an appropriation of Mary Tudor's iconography that overtly overlays its Catholic associations with a new Protestant meaning—one that highlights the power of the city of London. She also speculates that Richard Grafton may have been the designer of this unique tableau. See Susan Frye, *Elizabeth I: The Competition for Representation* (New York: Oxford, 1993), pp. 43-4.

receiving the words of Truth from the city. The sovereign dispenses theological truth to the subjects, *not the other way around*.

It may be well here to note that the coronation procession is by no means unique in these petitions to the monarch placed in the mouths of children as representatives of the community. The Norwich pageant of 1578, a good deal closer to Shakespeare's *Richard III*, employed a variety of children as representatives of various trades. The Norwich pageants themselves must have been charged with political tensions, as Elizabeth I showed the Catholic Duke of Anjou about Norwich, a bastion of English Protestantism. The resulting progress was 'something of a muddle,' uneasily blending anti-Catholic rhetoric with a firm statement of loyal support for the queen, whatever decision she might make.²⁴ It may not have been as famous a political event as the coronation procession, but it was probably just as charged.

According to Bernard Garter and William Goldingham, the first stage of the Norwich procession was painted with a variety of figures representing crafts and trades central to local life. Of particular interest, 'a portraiture of a matron and two or three children' presided over the stage, accompanied by the words, 'Good nurture changeth qualities.'²⁵ The implication that the queen ought to 'nurture' her subjects to get the best out of them was thus writ above the procession in a bold emblem. To spell out just what sort of nurturing might be necessary, the city presented 'a pretty boy, richly appareled' who addressed the queen with memorised verses.²⁶ This pretty boy pleaded with the queen that 'our [Norwich's] seat denies our traffic here / so weak we were within this dozen year / As care did quench the courage of the best.'²⁷ The city's tableaux reflected the disruption in Norwich's lucrative trade with the Netherlands, a serious public matter for a large port city and one that needed to be addressed while they had the sovereign's ear.²⁸ Of more interest for our purposes here, however, the city of Norwich clearly selected a child to make this difficult address to the queen—playing upon the perceived responsibilities of the sovereign as a parent of the state.

Petitions to the queen that leaned upon a rhetoric of monarch-as-parent were never limited to civic processes; they seem to have been a useful and poignant tool for subjects tasked with addressing charged or taboo topics. Parliament's 1566 petition

²⁴ *Elizabeth I and Her Age*, ed. by Donald Stump and Susan M. Felch, (New York: Norton, 2009), p. 239.

²⁵ Bernard Garter and William Goldingham, *The Ioyfull Receyuing of the Queenes Most Excellent Maiestie Into Hir Highnesse Citie of Norvich*. (London: Henry Bynneman, 1578), p. 11.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 11.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 12.

²⁸ Stump and Felch, p. 246.

asserting the right to freedom of speech, for example, picked up the rhetoric of motherhood the queen had used earlier, and asked that parliament be ‘like children, for duty, reverence, and love without the burden of any unnecessary, unaccustomed or undeserved yoke.’²⁹ This and other petitions had a clear logic to them; they called the queen to action if she meant to be a good, metaphorical mother (as she had claimed). As Helen Hackett has argued, this rhetoric of natural mother-child relations had become ‘metaphorical, emotional blackmail’ and the queen’s decision to stop calling herself the mother of the state somewhere in the 1570s may have betokened a rejection of such blackmail, or at least an awareness of the troubling remainders that rhetoric provided.³⁰ The rhetorical strategy of lecturing the sovereign through a child-cryptograph, however, would not vanish simply because the queen stopped reinforcing it.

II: Cipher-Children and Sovereigns in Shakespeare’s *Richard III*

The children of *Richard III* agitate both with ‘innocent’ or cipherous speeches and with coded challenges that throw the figure of the sovereign into stark relief. They call the sovereign to a moral reckoning. In Richard’s case, they highlight his pointed failure to display the affinities of kin and resist his attempts to co-opt them into his own narrative of political ascendancy.³¹ Rather than considering the play’s child-critiques and mending his ways, Richard schemes to silence the diminutive voices that offer them. His failure to stop their voices and the self-referential narrative produced by Shakespeare’s play—that Richard had his nephews killed in the tower—both witness to the power of these children, a ‘truth’ that lives from age to age.

An apt place to begin a reading of children in *Richard III*, Act II showcases the strange spectacle of a suicidal Queen Elizabeth chastened into silence by the rude replies of children. Following the death of King Edward, Queen Elizabeth’s sudden entrance strikes a dramatic pose as she asserts her royal prerogative and commands those present either to perpetual mourning or to a suicide pact. She exclaims

Oh, who shall hinder me to wail and weep,
To chide my fortune, and torment myself?

²⁹ Hackett, pp. 77-8.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 78.

³¹ Children petitioning the sovereign on behalf of the civic body have a curiously consistent presence in Shakespeare’s corpus. One may recall, for example, in *Coriolanus*, the child that turns the titular character’s wrath away from the destruction of his homeland (V.iii.175-177). Coriolanus flips from a negation of the affinities of kin, saying ‘Wife, mother, child, I know not’ (V.ii.83) to acknowledging his responsibilities when confronted with the spectacle of his kneeling child.

I'll join with black despair against my soul,
And to myself become an enemy...
If you will live, lament; if die, be brief,
That our swift-winged souls may catch the king's. (II.ii.34-44)

The queen appears here both pitiable and powerful, though perhaps maudlin enough to become a bathetic spectacle. One might expect her command to be met with trepidation or at least a modicum of sympathetic respect, but she receives something quite different. While the Duchess of York cozens her with words of mutual grief, the characters the *dramatis personae* archetypally label 'Boy' and 'Girl,' Edward and Margaret, firmly reject her command, delivering a potent dart of truth to power.³² 'Ah, aunt!' says Edward, 'you wept not for our father's death. / How can we aid you with our kindred tears?' (II.ii.62-3). Of course, this Boy's words contain a sting of truth; while it might be reprehensible for the children to refuse to mourn with the queen, it was surely just such a violation of prescriptive natural affections when the queen stood silent after the death of Clarence. Margaret has even more direct language for the queen. 'Our fatherless distress was left unmoaned,' she says, 'Your widow-dolor likewise be unwept!' (II.ii.64-5). In short order, Edward and Margaret reject the queen's command and chastise her for giving it. Even Londoners with little experience at court must have suspected that this was not the way that adults talked to the grief-stricken Elizabeth of England.³³

But the curious ontological dislocation of these two figures, a social dislocation, allows them to speak a painful truth to Queen Elizabeth. She responds—as a famously politic, eponymous queen responded at a small platform in Cheapside—not by rebuking the children but by recognising their singular right to speak truth to power. Her reply contains a note of resignation; 'give me no help in lamentation / I am not barren to bring forth complaints / All springs reduce their currents to mine eyes' (II.ii.66-8). The queen's words do not retreat from her eminently justified mourning, but neither does she castigate or punish the children who have directly defied her.

³² Because *Richard III* has the unfortunate historical responsibility of representing three Edwards, I differentiate between them by calling them Boy, Prince Edward and King Edward, in keeping with the extra-textual markings of the first folio text.

³³ The consistent resonances between Elizabeth of York and Elizabeth Tudor have featured prominently in recent readings of the coronation pageants and have obvious echoes here. See Judith M. Richards, 'Love and Female Monarch; the Case of Elizabeth Tudor', *The Journal of British Studies* 38.2 (1999), 138-60 (p. 142).

Allison Machlis Meyer has argued that the rewriting of Elizabeth of York in history plays of the 1590s, and particularly Shakespeare's *Richard III*, reacted against an earlier generation of historiography that had 'afforded women of royal blood important political agency'; Shakespeare's play locates the queen in an arena that is 'solely familial' and that 'separated them from national concerns.'³⁴ Certainly Meyer is on to something. Elizabeth of York wields surprisingly little political agency in Shakespeare's play and her dramatic display in Act II reminds one of the stock 'hysterical' women of the Gothic novel.³⁵ Yet Meyer's argument trivialises the importance of the family in *Richard III*—which is, after all, conspicuously concerned with the question of royal legitimacy and its conferral by natural kinship relationships. By allowing the words of Edward and Margaret to go unopposed, Elizabeth of York reaffirms the singular rights conferred by the affinities of kin. She becomes an *exemplum* of natural sovereignty and admits that children have a certain, fragile right to speak truth to sovereign power.

This kind of admission and the curtailing of personal prerogative that it entails become all but unimaginable in the character of Richard of Gloucester. If Shakespeare's history plays, as Michael Hattaway identified, are primarily about reigns while being named for individuals, the implications of this personal failure are wide-ranging.³⁶ Richard clearly recognises the value of implanting innocent children with subversive political narratives, but throughout the play he remains a potent antagonist to the affinities of kin that buttress children's right to speak truth to power.³⁷ Consider the aforementioned Boy's description of a meeting between himself and his 'good uncle Gloucester' (II.ii.20). The narrative opens with this Boy asking Richard (who was responsible for Clarence's death) how his father was killed (I.i.118). To answer his question, Richard deploys the potent fantasy of an unnatural sovereign who violates the affinities of kin,

³⁴ Meyer, p. 157.

³⁵ Lynne Magnusson has read this sort of rhetoric as 'a distinctive language of female passion' that borrows heavily from the optative mood of English schoolboy classroom exercises rather than 'the play's recognized sources'; the hysterical feminine voice thus becomes the transposed location for pubescent male identity definition. See Lynne Magnusson, 'Grammatical Theatricality in *Richard III*: Schoolroom Queens and Godly Optatives', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 64.1 (2013), 32-43 (pp. 32-3).

³⁶ See Michael Hattaway, 'The Shakespearean History Play' in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's History Plays*, ed. by Michael Hattaway (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2002), pp. 3-24 (pp. 6-10).

³⁷ As Heather Dubrow has noticed, Richard evinces a popular tendency in early modern drama to caution against the dangers of trusting an untrustworthy family guardian who may stand the affinities of kin on their head. See Heather Dubrow, "'The Infant of Your Care': Guardianship in Shakespeare's *Richard III* and Early Modern England' in *Domestic Arrangement in Early Modern England*, ed. by Kari Boyd McBride (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 2002), pp. 147-168 (p. 147).

but projects that critique onto the legitimate king rather than himself. The Boy narrates that Richard

Told me the King, [King Edward] provoked to it by the Queen,
Devised Impeachments to imprison him [the boy's father]
And when my uncle told me so he wept,
And pitied me, and kindly kissed my cheeks;
Bade me rely on him as on my father,
And he would love me dearly as a child. (II.ii.21-6)

The memorable spectre of Richard's fluid dissembling can obscure an important machination here; hiding in this boy's description is Richard's first attempt to implant a child with a subversive political narrative—that the king has failed to behave according to the affinities of kin. As a cipher, of course, the boy can relate this narrative without fear of reprisal. Furthermore, by turning this child into a subversive political agent, Richard achieves something more subtle, something nastier. He becomes the boy's father by killing him. He steals the affinities of kin, a facet of fatherhood itself, and ensures that future generations remember him as a good and natural father in opposition to King Edward.

Most Shakespeare scholars sense something perverse or disturbing about the invented, organised or imagined family affinities that Richard creates in tableaux like this one. Indeed, one of Richard's most unnerving characteristics is the perverse joy he seemingly takes in forming unnatural family bonds, a reflection of the rhetoric of deformity that shrouds his character in literary history.³⁸ Yet this perversity, by negative example, reinforces traditional family relationships and the accompanying assumptions of the affinities of kin. The Duchess of York, Richard's mother and an erstwhile representative of the insights conferred by natural family bonds, is the first to recognize Richard's machination. After Edward and Margaret report Richard's story to the duchess, she dismisses it out of hand. 'Peace, children, peace!' she says. 'The King doth

³⁸ As one of the most famous representatives of disability on the early modern stage, Richard of Gloucester's very presence invoked 'the full range of other stigmatization traditions that reflect the complexities of non-normative embodiment.' See David Houston, 'New Directions: "Some Tardy Cripple": Timing Disability in Richard III,' in *Richard III; a Critical Reader* ed. by Annaliese Connolly (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 129-154 (p. 130). For insight into the chronology of Richard's refashioning as an unnatural, deformed tyrant (the so-called Tudor myth), see Marie-Helene Besnault and Michael Bitot, 'Historical Legacy and Fiction: The Poetical Reinvention of King Richard III', *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's History Plays*, ed. by Michael Hattaway (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2002), pp. 106-125 (pp. 107-112).

love you well. / Incapable and shallow innocents, / You cannot guess who caused your father's death' (II.ii.17-19). Her reply both addresses the children's immediate concerns and identifies their role as innocent carriers of narratives not their own. Boy Edward, sadly, remains under the sway of Richard's deception. He closes the scene by saying 'I cannot think my uncle did dissemble' (II.ii.31-3). Thus far, the child representatives of the play have been thoroughly bamboozled by Richard's subversion of the affinities of kin.

It is worth noting that this subversive counter narrative (that King Edward is a 'false father') becomes a key element in Richard's bid to usurp the throne. Richard articulates this strategy on stage in a conversation with Buckingham about King Edward's children, now legitimate heirs to the throne. He instructs Buckingham to follow the Mayor to Guildhall, saying,

There, at your meet'st advantage of the time,
Infer the bastardy of Edward's children.
Tell them how Edward put to death a citizen
Only for saying he would make his son
Heir to the Crown—meaning indeed his house (III.v.74-8).

Richard's slander in these lines not only undermines the legitimacy of King Edward's children, but strives again to usurp King Edward's position as good, natural father of the state. This is the lie that Richard told the Boy grown into a full-blown *coup d'état*.

These contested grounds of conflict, a heady cocktail of natural fatherhood and political legitimacy, come to a head in the later Acts of the play. By Act IV, Richard has long since assumed practical sovereign authority, but seeks to maintain the appearance of theorised natural subservience, a charade of legitimacy conferred by his own carefully crafted legacy as an observer of the affinities of kin. Brackenbury's confusion over Richard's title indicates the trickling down of this unstable and contradictory pose. Barring the queen from her children, Brackenbury says he cannot admit her because 'The King hath strictly charged the contrary' (IV.i.17). Recognising his revealing gaffe, he hastily corrects himself, 'I mean the Lord Protector' (IV.i.19). The complicated hypocrisy of this scene, as Richard steps once again into the analogous position of a guardian (Lord Protector) while angling for the authority of the father (King) should not go unnoticed. The queen certainly recognises what has happened, as she lashes out, 'the Lord protect him from that kingly title! / Hath he set bounds between their love and me? / I am their mother; who shall bar me from them?' (IV.i.19-21). It may seem unsurprising to find Richard unnaturally separating a mother from her children, but his

attempt to maintain a counter-narrative of proper political and familial legitimacy is far more revealing. It demonstrates that there is something at stake in the apparent maintenance of proper kin relationships, and particularly Richard's relationship with the children who represent his own future legacy.

Even as the wielder of real-political power, however, Richard cannot escape the prerogative of children to speak truth to power, as his loaded exchange with the princes of Act III shows. Richard opens the scene with a formal welcome, inquiring about the Prince's journey. Prince Edward cagily replies that the arrest of the queen and her kindred (for which, as both know, Richard is responsible) have made it wearisome; the rebuke is completed by a cleverly ambiguous sting, as prince Edward says, 'I want more uncles here to welcome me' (III.i.4-6). Prince Edward exposes Richard's simultaneous political and familial duplicity—if he were only a loyal subject or good uncle he would be accompanied by other subjects of equal rank and/or other uncles.

Richard, undaunted, replies with one of his characteristic displays of sophistic acumen, designed precisely to turn the world of familial and political loyalty inside out. He says,

Sweet prince, the untainted virtue of your years
Hath not yet div'd into the world's deceit:
Nor more can you distinguish of a man
Than of his outward show; which, God he knows,
Seldom or never jumpeth with the heart.
Those uncles which you want were dangerous;
Your grace attended to their sugar'd words
But look'd not on the poison of their hearts:
God keep you from them and from such false friends! (III.i.7-15)

As always, Richard mixes a tincture of truth in his lie; his remonstrance against 'sugar'd words' and poisonous hearts is firstly a warning against himself. But Richard's warnings prove unnecessary as well as insincere. Prince Edward, despite his assumed innocence, responds in a manner that openly dispels Richard's attempt to position himself as a guardian of the affinities of kin. 'God keep me from false friends!' he says, 'but they were none' (III.i.16). Prince Edward protects the possibility, of course, that other false friends might be present.

While Prince Edward quietly challenges Richard's fragile shaming of familial affections, young York (the boy Richard, Duke of York) ratchets up the tension. His pointed request that Richard give up his sword in deference to the power he wields as a

kinsman challenges Richard to reaffirm his familial affections with a loaded symbolic gesture (III.i.110-25). In keeping with his character, Richard refuses. But that limited and loaded repartee is less important than the underlying power struggle that both Richard and Buckingham read in young York's 'scorn' and 'sharp-provided wit' (III.i.132-3). As Buckingham suggests after the princes depart, 'this little prating York' played the role of a cipher or virtuoso, taught to scorn Richard by his 'subtle' mother (III.i.153). Indeed, Richard remarks that the boy 'is all the mother's, from the top to toe,' transposing not just his voice with hers but his body with hers (III.i.156). The child becomes not only a mouthpiece tasked with voicing controversial truths, but a mouthpiece that mirrors its manipulator.

The agonistic and coded exchange between Richard and the princes reaches its climax as they approach the ominous spectre of the Tower of London, a location that clearly forebodes the boys' murder.³⁹ In this loaded site of cultural memory prince Edward demonstrates his acute awareness of the conflicting narratives at stake, and crafts a final reply to Richard's attempt to cast himself as a good father and rightful king. To accomplish this feat, the prince baits Richard by interrogating the report that Julius Caesar built the Tower of London. Prince Edward inquires 'Is it upon record, or else reported / Successively from age to age, he built it?' (III.i.72-3). The prince's question here examines the transmission of historical knowledge both by official, written means, and by underground oral channels. Buckingham, still Richard's toady, replies that the story was written down, lodged in the strictly controlled official histories. Buckingham's reply quietly implies that the legacy of a building as a function of the writing of histories, like the legacy of the princes murdered in that building, can be controlled or manipulated. Prince Edward's answer self-referentially stands this tautology on its head. He continues, unimpressed,

But say, my lord, it were not registered,
Methinks the truth should live from age to age,
As 'twere retailed to all posterity,

³⁹ The legend of the princes murdered in the Tower had already attained a degree of cultural cache by the 1590s. Indeed, in an Elizabethan England where knowledge often molded itself to the contours of power, the imaginative force of the legend was signaled in that it had to be added to the curious lore that surrounded official tours of the Tower during the 1590s. Here I am following Kristin Deiter who has argued convincingly that plays about Richard III between 1579 and perhaps as late as 1599 forced official tours of the Tower to include both Princes' murders. According to Deiter, the decision to include a narrative of the princes' murders in official tours of the Tower shows that the crown, 'losing control of the Tower's ideological meaning to the playwrights, reappropriated the Richard III story to keep the Tower's lore consistent with the Tudor Myth'. See Kristen Deiter, *The Tower of London in Renaissance English Drama: Icon of Opposition* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 75.

Even to the general all-ending day (III.i.75-8).

Prince Edward predicts that legacy, in the mirror of future generations, will bear witness to the truth despite attempts at distortion. This warning attacks Richard in the voice of the very constituency Richard's narrative was fashioned to court—the next generation and the question of legacy that returns to haunt Richard in Act V.

Richard refuses to let this challenge go unmet. He responds bitterly in the aside, 'so wise so young, they say, do never live long' (III.i.79). This aside, couched in an extra-dialogic device, remains unheard by the prince, but when Richard is called to account for it he answers with another loaded reply. 'I say,' he alters his position, 'without characters fame lives long' (III.i.81). Richard's double inference, admitting that without written records a narrative may be passed down by word of mouth, and that the princes' fame will live without their physical bodies, provides a coded reply to Edward's coded attack. Perhaps history cannot be controlled by written records and the memory of Prince Edward may survive; the prince will not.

Prince Edward returns to the Tower and its reputed builder to make his reply. 'Death makes no conquest of this conqueror,' he meditates, 'For now he lives in fame, though not in life' (III.i.87-8). Prince Edward cannot deny Richard's sovereign power in his present position, but he can return to the principle that fame outlasts death, and that, by extension, Richard's role as an unnatural father of the state will not be rewritten. Still, Richard will have his day. Prince Edward's final words complete the scene, 'come, my lord; with a heavy heart...go I unto the Tower' (III.i.149-50).

The subsequent killing of the princes becomes the play's tragic core and Tyrrel's description in Act IV gilds the scene with all the verbal flourishes expected of a famous Shakespearean spectacle. He reports that,

The tyrannous and bloody act is done,
The most arch deed of piteous massacre
That ever yet this land was guilty of
Dighton and Forrest, whom I did suborn
To do this piece of ruthless butchery,
Albeit they were fleshed villains, bloody dogs
Melted with tenderness and mild compassion,
Wept like children in their deaths' sad story (IV.iii.1-8).

The dissolution of the natural affections of the family and the pathetic spectacle of these children's murdered bodies bring the play to a crescendo. But by reporting this tragic event, the play itself affirms that Prince Edward spoke the truth; that the murderous legacy of Richard III, not his counter-narrative of manufactured legitimacy, would live into the next age.

One may see in these children of *Richard III* the old reading of children as spectacles, signposts that mark the unravelling of the moral world of the play. Richard murders the princes, becomes a monster and must be dispatched by a legitimate (Tudor) sovereign. But children do much more than merely die in Shakespeare's play. They become representatives of the community that alternatively join and contend with different sovereigns in answering questions of legacy and in reaffirming the natural affinities of kin. In Prince Edward's singular case, a child contends with Richard over the ascendancy of political narrative itself, a coded warning that the truth, even in opposition to the machinations of absolute power, should live from age to age.