

The Cygnet and the Shepherd: Children's Agency in Shakespeare's *King John*

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Abstract: Scholarship on the child characters in Shakespeare's *King John* has generally emphasized their helplessness in the face of the political ambitions and dominant emotions of the play's adult characters. Arthur, especially, is often described as being entirely absent of agency, despite his vital importance to the plot. In response to this critical consensus, my essay explores an alternative reading of the play which instead centres the sparse agency the children do possess, and thus explicates Arthur and Henry III's ephemeral, subversive visions of the future that unsettle the play's ordered ending.

Shakespeare's *King John* is foremostly a play about sons—bastard sons, youngest sons, and especially dead sons. Prince Arthur's infanticide marks a turning point in the action; John's lords temporarily turn against him, and in the ensuing chaos, John nearly takes English sovereignty to the grave with him. Arthur's death also facilitates the sudden appearance of Prince Henry: his cousin, his political double, and the royal family's last surviving legitimate heir. Throughout the play, the two princes find themselves the unwitting foci of political violence; regardless of their personal wishes, their families see them as pawns in the conflict for the English throne. The notion of the narratively imprisoned and politically puppeted child character has been explored in contemporary scholarship, which has focused primarily on the ways in which the play's adult characters come to overpower the identities of their children, whether by casting them as vortexes of affective and sexual energy or as vessels for fantasies of childhood (Campana 19; Miller 222). In this essay, I will reevaluate the agency of the child characters in *King John* and explore their

characterizations beyond the desires and fantasies of their parental figures. I argue that by strategically taking control of the play's language and imagery, the princes consciously break from the influence of the adults and define themselves as individual agents.

Scholarship on childhood in *King John* has mostly revolved around Arthur—the more significant of the two princes—and the disjunction between his “embodied reality” and the adult characters’ objectifying interpretations of him (Miller 225). According to Joseph Campana, “Arthur emerges as an irresistible principle of seduction”: his presence unsettles John and Hubert, who must reckon the political necessity of his murder with the ethical expectation of familial love (28, 27). Campana concludes that “[t]he child does not exist to embody or perform vulnerability. This is, rather, the fantasy of adults” (29). Thus, this essay is interested in what the child does for themselves, beyond Arthur’s mere penchant for empathy (28–29). Gemma Miller similarly recognizes the distinction between the reality of Arthur’s life and the aestheticization of his body, and furthers Campana’s argument that “Constance’s ideal consummation with her child requires his death” (31). Miller casts her as a “frustrated Petrarchan lover . . . irresistibly drawn to, while being repulsed by, the macabre object of her desire”—that is, Arthur’s corpse, whom she mourns before he actually dies (222). Moreover, Constance’s agency comes at the cost of the child’s: “in asserting her own voice, she silences that of her son, relegating him to an aestheticized fantasy of childhood” (Miller 224). Charlotte Scott summarizes his character as “everything and nothing: the centre of the play-world and yet small, silent, and apart from it” (62). The following close readings will attempt to uncover not how Arthur and Henry can come to rejoin the “play-world,” but how they might break its social confines and conceive of other futures beyond the boundaries of the dramatized action.

Campana argues that Arthur, “by virtue of an influence accorded him by powerful adult fantasies about childhood ... threatens not merely genealogical order but

the structures that determine how power and agency are constituted” (26). However, Campana overlooks the presence of Arthur’s personal, independent desires when discussing his influence upon the order of the play. Indeed, he directly contests and exploits these “adult fantasies,” particularly during the execution sequence with Hubert (Shakespeare 4.1.33–120). The prince carefully navigates their conversation, exploiting at various points Hubert’s pity, revulsion, and sovereign loyalty. While the effect superficially amounts to a desperate, disorganized search for mercy from his would-be torturer, Arthur—evidently capable of manipulation himself—never lets an opportunity for rhetorical dominance go to waste. Moreover, he establishes his own vision for the future in this scene, one that is opposite to those belonging to the other, more dominating male characters. Arthur’s first speech in Act 4, Scene 1 establishes the rhetorical imagery he will later revisit once he gains full knowledge of Hubert’s intention to torture him. The core idea is radical: Arthur feels exhausted by the political scheming and powerless to escape his uncle, so he dreams of being “taken away from the world that surrounds him” to become a pastoral shepherd (Scott 59; Shakespeare 4.1.17). The prince nests his dream in religious language, casting himself as a kind of Christ figure; he stakes the veracity of his wish on his own “Christendom,” and swears to “God” when he tells Hubert, “I were your son, so you would love me” (Shakespeare 4.1.16, 24). The sheep imagery reappears when Arthur offers to “sit as quiet as a lamb” in exchange for Hubert dismissing the executioners (4.1.79). Arthur acknowledges his role as a sacrifice to John, the divine ruler, but for him the role is mere facade: he refuses his “promise” of silent lambhood and restarts his rhetoric at line 96. Arthur rejects not only John’s will, as executed by Hubert, but also his own narrative function as a pathetic instrument of the English succession system—he is a flawed lamb, unwilling to accept his own Christlike martyrdom (Blake 304).

Arthur and Hubert vie for emotional control, but the prince ultimately achieves rhetorical superiority on line

103, when he notices that the iron poker has cooled over the course of their conversation: “the instrument is cold / And would not harm me” (Shakespeare 4.1.104). The last phrase is an evenly split half-line which Hubert completes with, “I can heat it, boy” (4.1.104). The perfect meter indicates neither interruption nor extended silence, and so contrasts with an earlier half-line wherein Arthur attempts to establish a distinction between Hubert’s identities as murderer and father-figure:

ARTHUR. Let him come back, that his compassion
may / Give life to yours.

HUBERT. Come, boy, prepare yourself. (4.1.88–89)

In this case, the fleeting hexameter implies an interruption which furthers Hubert’s ultimately unsuccessful attempt to avoid being persuaded; their words overlap, and Hubert refuses to respond to Arthur’s argument. In the later half-line, however, Hubert allows him to both finish constructing his argument and define the terms of engagement. The pronoun “it” points to the word “instrument”—Hubert has adopted the prince’s language. Thus, the full phrase, “I can heat it,” reads less like an order from a dominant paternal figure and more like a question or suggestion—and indeed, Arthur answers with a concise “[n]o, in good sooth” (4.1.105). Arthur gains further ground when Hubert unconsciously pits his own “breath” against the “breath of heaven,” which has blown out the fire (4.1.109–111). Though Arthur admits he is an imperfect martyr, Hubert, by comparison, is ungodly. This implied invocation of heresy aligns with Scott’s argument that, in Act 4, Scene 1, Shakespeare underscores “infanticide as the greatest of human crimes” (65). However, the directionality here is key—Arthur establishes the language first, and Hubert falls into his rhetorical trap.

Further proof of Arthur’s ambivalence to his own birthright comes during act 3, when Salisbury informs him and Constance of the truce between John and Philip. Constance laments not merely the loss of potential political power but, nihilistically, the very purpose of her family: “O, boy, then where art thou? / . . . What becomes of me?”

(Shakespeare 3.1.34–35). Morriss Henry Partee identifies Arthur's "maturity and emotional stability" when the prince implores Constance to "be content" with the consolation prize of his titles, "Duke of Britain / And Earl of Richmond," and lordship of Angiers, which John had promised to him during the wedding (Partee 69; Shakespeare 3.1.42, 2.1.551–53). Like his dream of becoming a French shepherd, Arthur alludes to yet another alternate future: political exile in the city which once sought "peace and fair-faced league," free from the political machinations surrounding him (2.1.417). Unlike his blood cousin Philip Faulconbridge, Arthur views his royal inheritance as a nuisance. He is acutely aware of his youth, and consistently prioritizes his own life above any political ambitions. When he welcomes King Philip to Angiers, he asks him to deliver not the throne but simply his own survival (2.1.13). With the specific elements of Arthur's desires established, his cousin's motivations can come into clearer focus.

Campana describes Henry as "Arthur's substitute: the new heir and the play's representative royal child" who "speaks for the dominant temporal clichés" that inform the traditional power structure of succession by primogeniture (36). However, Henry inherits—alongside Arthur's claim to the throne—his interest in the subversive pastoral. Henry charges Pembroke to bring the dying John into "the orchard here," thereby coaxing Arthur's dream of countryside sheep fields into reality (Shakespeare 5.7.10; 4.1.17). As John's condition deteriorates, Henry becomes his caretaker, just as Arthur becomes a caretaker for his surrogate father, Hubert (4.1.41–53). Throughout Act 5, Scene 7, the play draws attention to the reversal of filial responsibilities: poison renders the king a child who babbles "idle comments" (5.7.4), while his son must prematurely take on sovereign power in order to control what remains of his father's court. By recognizing and confronting the sudden and unnatural inversion of his own boyhood, Henry's subsequent speeches take on a hesitant, fatalistic tone, thereby unsettling his own sovereign destiny.

Henry goes on to physically juxtapose himself with John, describing himself as “the cygnet to this pale faint swan, / Who chants a doleful hymn to his own death” (Shakespeare 5.7.21–22). The image obviously puns on “swansong” and John’s mad ramblings (“Swansong”), but also both establishes a cyclical sense of time and alludes to Arthur’s peaceful pastoral world. Henry foresees himself repeating John’s death when he matures—the pronoun “who” briefly and proleptically applies to both father and son. Moreover, Salisbury claims that Henry was “born” to “set a form upon that indigest”—in other words, to restore John’s body and mind (5.7.25–26). However, Henry takes a subtly different perspective. Rather than attempting to rise to Salisbury’s expectations as a miraculous healer or otherwise rush to call upon a doctor, Henry takes the opportunity to lament his *lack* of ability: “O that there were some virtue in my tears / That might relieve you” (5.7.44–45). Among the retinue present, Henry alone understands the futility of trying to save his father’s life. His inability to help may emerge from his youthful naivety rather than a pragmatic calculation—thus lies yet another example of the ambiguity intrinsic to the play’s royal children.

According to Ann Blake, Arthur’s “gentle, loving nature ... provide[s] the antithesis to the play’s violent world of betrayal, conflict, and self-assertion” (303). If this “nature” rests in Arthur’s vision of the pastoral, then Henry, by inheriting the pastoral, becomes at least partially associated with his predecessor’s desire to break from the sociopolitical expectations assigned to them as heirs. How, then, does this diametric reading reckon with the textual reality of Henry’s ascension to the throne? One possible solution lies in a reinterpretation of the following lines:

E’en so must I run on and e’en so stop.
What surety of the world, what hope, what stay,
When this was now a king, and now is clay?
(Shakespeare 5.7.67–69)

Campana interprets this passage as Henry “[transforming] the play’s troubled sovereignty into moral exemplarity ... the wild principle of uncertainty comes to refer exclusively

to the inevitability of death, which bolsters Henry III's temporal and political claims" (36). However, with hints of the alternative pastoral future in mind, the "inevitability of death" encoded in the cycle of succession weighs heavy on Henry's own reign and this brief speech. The "clay" that composes John's body was, mere moments ago, an animate man suffering prolonged death throes; his last gift to his son is an image of a future involving not divine glory and wartime victory, but suffering and madness (Shakespeare 4.7.69). This image informs the hesitancy in Henry's question, itself self-reflexively and fatalistically alluding to the historical reality of the young king's future reign, which was mired by political infighting ("Henry III"). Henry's skepticism towards the "surety of the world" takes on a prophetic, dramatically ironic tone: far from a "prop" signifying restored political order (Campana 36). Henry is a reluctant boy-king whose filial and sovereign loyalty is clouded by Arthur's ghostly dreams of escape and haunted by the trauma of his father's undignified death. Throughout Act 5, Scene 7, Henry simultaneously holds three competing futures: Arthur's impossible, unrealized pastoral, the apparent textual restoration of order, and the historical reality of Henry III's rule. These futures carry forth the princes' complicated, yet-unrealized desires, placing pressure on the ordered ending of the play.

Despite Arthur and Henry's best efforts to define themselves as agents beyond the reach of their parental figures, they inevitably succumb to their promised fates—kingship in Henry's case, and death in Arthur's. The children are bound by the limits of the historical record which ensures their alternative futures will not come to pass. However, the very presence of these futures indicates a vast multiplicity of worldviews beyond the cursory French-versus-English binary. As this essay has shown, the child characters use their respective rhetorical talents to construct an undeniable vision of a comedic dream that undermines the play's militant, nationalistic overtones.

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