

King John (Fall 2006)

In *The Life and Death of King John*, Shakespeare seems intent on pushing hyperbole to its wildest extremes. Every action is presented as though a similar action had never before happened in the history of the world. Thus Lewis, the French Dauphin, can exclaim, following a disastrous defeat by the English army, “So hot a speed with such advice disposed, / Such temperate order in so fierce a cause, / Doth want example. Who hath read or heard / Of any kindred action like to this?” [III.iv.11–14]. (Apparently Lewis has never read the *Henry VI* plays . . . or Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine* . . . or Holinshed’s *Chronicles*!) When several scenes later France retaliates, it is England’s turn to disbelieve: Bellows a messenger, “Never such a power / For any foreign preparation / Was levied in the body of a land” [IV.ii.110–12]. Even the suspicious death of John’s nephew Arthur, reluctant rival to his uncle’s throne, is described as though it were a second Crucifixion, and not merely the removal of a pawn in a dirty game:

Have you beheld,
Or have you read or heard, or could you think,
Or do you almost think, although you see,
That you do see? Could thought, without this object,
Form such another? This is the very top,
The height, the crest, or crest unto the crest,
Of murder’s arms. This is the bloodiest shame,
The wildest savagery, the vilest stroke,
That ever walleyed wrath or staring rage
Presented to the tears of soft remorse.

[IV.iii.41–50]

Interestingly, these lines are spoken by Salisbury, the same lord who had criticized John for “paint[ing] the lily,” for “wasteful and ridiculous excess” [IV.ii.9–16] following John’s “double coronation” [IV.ii.40], an act intended to reinforce his tenuous hold on the scepter of state. (John shall later be crowned a *third* time, by the

Machiavellian Cardinal Pandulph, to symbolize his new-made peace with Rome.) Doubtlessly Shakespeare sees the ironies his characters miss. What then could be spurring this overheated dash across familiar ground? If there is a voice we might heed for clues, it belongs to the one character Shakespeare did not draw from the English chronicles, the invented man, who consequently belongs to his time even as he views it from beyond:

Faulconbridge the Bastard

My guess is that most people come to *King John*—if ever—having already encountered *Much Ado About Nothing* and *King Lear*. In light of these later plays, it can be difficult to meet Faulconbridge without seeking the villainous stamp—the dark, defiant cynicism—of Shakespeare’s better-known bastards, Don John and Edmund. The self-centered squabbles that threaten to topple John’s regime give Faulconbridge ample occasion to, in his own memorable words, “break faith upon commodity” [II.i.597]. Instead he remains loyal to John to the end, and for his good service is rewarded with the play’s closing speech:

. . . This England never did, nor never shall,
Lie at the proud foot of a conqueror
But when it first did help to wound itself.
Now these her princes are come home again,
Come the three corners of the world in arms,
And we shall shock them. Nought shall make us rue
If England to itself do rest but true.

[V.vii.112–18]

The characters who people Shakespeare’s histories are rarely capable of such stirring sincerity—John is as problematic as any king in the canon (including, as we shall see, the so-called “mirror of all Christian kings” [*Henry V*, II.0.6]), and his aristocratic peers, who exchange allegiances with the shifting winds of fortune, are no better. In

in Eleanor's fine description, "Lord of thy presence and no land beside" [I.i.137]. Shakespeare may or may not have known the extent to which King Richard the Lion-Hearted is a character of legend¹; regardless, it is wonderfully appropriate that his "natural" son is both the most fictitious and self-assured character in the play. "Well, now can I make any Joan a lady," he quips to kick off one of the first truly probing soliloquies Shakespeare wrote [I.i.184], yet something about the ease with which he has been transformed demands further reflection, lest identity prove as mutable as a name: "For new-made honor doth forget men's names; / 'Tis too respectful and too sociable / For your conversion" [I.i.187–9].

After an amusing tangent in which he imagines an after-dinner conversation between his "knightly" self [I.i.191] and a nameless traveler—a "dialogue of compliment" [I.i.201], with each man professing more devoted service to the other—Faulconbridge turns his attention inward, in some of the most cryptic lines Shakespeare had yet written. Though he has gained the favor of his king and queen by being splendidly unselfconscious—"A good blunt fellow" [I.i.71], according to John—he seems intuitively to understand he has entered a "worshipful society" in which every aspiring courtier is a "mounting spirit like myself":

For he is but a bastard to the time
That doth not smack of observation.

¹ See Asimov: "Richard was a vain, faithless person, who was not very intelligent, and whose reign was one long disaster for England. He won battles and lost wars, and in his eternal quest for money with which to lose those wars, he would use any means, however ignoble. He sold land, offices, justice. He gave up his rights to Scotland for money. He squeezed the Jews and behaved in such a manner that anti-Semitic riots burst out all over England, . . . yet because he played what seemed a heroic role in the Crusades, he is forgiven everything by Englishmen, and the picture of him in their minds is the utterly false one glamorously drawn in books such as Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* and *The Talisman*." [215]

And so am I, whether I smack or no,
 And not alone in habit and device,
 Exterior form, outward accoutrement,
 But from the inward motion to deliver
 Sweet, sweet, sweet poison for the age's tooth . . .

[I.i.205–13]

There seem to be two fundamentally different interpretations of these lines: Either his “mounting spirit” shall ascend *by* “smacking of observation”—that is, by studiously observing successful peers and patterning his behavior after theirs—or Faulconbridge shall embrace his status as outsider, his bastardy, and “mount” above conventional society because he sees through and can therefore manipulate its “[e]xternal form, outward accoutrement.” The first path leads to ridicule, as Hamlet shall demonstrate at the expense of Osric, that memorable timeserver; the second may lead just as easily to Edmund. Both extremes poison a society: the one by enervation, as vigorous innovation collapses into decadence; the other by malice, as community is overtaken by a “state of nature.” Faulconbridge chooses neither. The bastard son of *Coeur de Lion* scorns ornamented, empty words: When, stung by a woman’s insults, the Duke of Austria (already an absurd figure in his lion-skin cloak, supposedly lifted from King Richard’s corpse) exclaims, “O that a man should speak those words to me,” Faulconbridge obliges, daring the duke to back his threat with deeds [III.i.130–1]; when a citizen of the besieged city of Angiers braves the armies camped outside its walls, Faulconbridge fires back:

[*Citizen*]: . . . The sea enraged is not half so deaf,
 Lions more confident, mountains and rocks
 More free from motion, no, not Death himself
 In mortal fury half so peremptory,
 As we to keep this city.

Bastard: Here’s a stay,
 That shakes the rotten carcase of old Death
 Out of his rags! Here’s a large mouth, indeed,
 That spits forth death and mountains, rocks and seas,

Talks as familiarly of roaring lions
As maids of thirteen do of puppy dogs.

[II.i.451–60]

Yet for all his aggression—at times verging on warmongering—Faulconbridge follows a moral compass. Of Arthur’s death he says, “It is a damned and a bloody work, / The graceless action of a heavy hand” [IV.iii.57–8], but in the absence of evidence he refuses—unlike his countrymen, the lords Salisbury, Pembroke, and Bigot—to attribute that “heavy hand” to John. When the lords band together to slay Hubert, whom they erroneously believe has executed Arthur on John’s orders, Faulconbridge strives as fervently to “Keep the peace” [IV.iii.93] as elsewhere he urges war. Soon, he finds himself alone with Hubert:

Bastard: 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.

Hubert: Upon my soul—

Bastard: If thou didst but consent
To this most cruel act, do but despair,
And if thou want’st a cord, the smallest thread
That ever spider twisted from her womb
Will serve to strangle thee; a rush will be a beam
To hang thee on. Or wouldst thou drown thyself,
Put but a little water in a spoon,
And it shall be as all the ocean,
Enough to stifle such a villain up.

[IV.iii.121–33]

Still Hubert protests his innocence until Faulconbridge is convinced—or at least too exhausted from rage to argue further. Indeed, he falls back upon a recurring theme, one of the most common in the play—“I am amazed, methinks, and lose my way / Among the thorns and dangers of this world” [IV.iii.140–1]—in a tone reminiscent of his first soliloquy’s. I have already quoted from that speech Faulconbridge’s vow “to deliver

/ . . . sweet poison for the age's tooth"; an equally cryptic vow follows: "Which, though I will not practice to deceive, / Yet, to avoid deceit, I mean to learn; / For it shall strew the footsteps of my rising" [I.i.214–6].

What does Faulconbridge "mean to learn": "to deceive" or "to avoid deceit"? Or does the one facilitate the other? Confronted with Arthur's death, Faulconbridge's instincts are sound: He places his faith in John and Hubert, who despite his threatening exterior—as Pembroke says, "The image of a wicked heinous fault / Lives in [Hubert's] eye" [IV.ii.71–2]—proves to be one of the most admirable characters in the play. Meanwhile, Pembroke and his fellows continue to be deceived by false appearances, revolting from John to the invading French army only to discover their new allies intend "to recompense the pains [they] take / By cutting off [their] heads" [V.iv.15–16].

Arthur, Hubert, and Faulconbridge—though they rarely appear all together—form an unofficial league beside which the corruption of both countrymen and enemies smells even ranker. Temptations abound in *King John*, and though the world of Shakespearean history rarely fails to stain its citizens, these three manage to retain more honor and dignity than they lose—no small feat. Propped up amidst equally treacherous friends, enemies, and relations, Arthur puts everyone to shame with two-and-a-half lines: "Good my mother, peace! / I would that I were low laid in my grave. / I am not worth this coil that's made for me" [II.i.163–5]. But his pleas go unheard, and Arthur is captured by the English army; this leads to John hissing, as he delivers his nephew to the eager-to-please Hubert:

I'll tell thee what, my friend,
He is a very serpent in my way,
And wheresoe'er this foot of mine doth tread
He lies before me. Dost thou understand me?

Thou art his keeper.

[III.iii.59–64]

Though Hubert accepts the role of executioner, his conscience revolts when faced with Arthur's innocence. (The equivocating Cardinal Pandulph might be addressing Hubert—albeit unintentionally—with these twisting lines: “The better act of purposes mistook / Is to mistake again; though indirect, / Yet indirection thereby grows direct, / And falsehood falsehood cures” [III.i.274–7].)

Faulconbridge is present for several broken vows in the Pandulphan mode, one following another till no standard seems to remain but self-interest, the subject of his second great soliloquy. King Philip of France has just withdrawn his support for Arthur to embrace a more politically advantageous alliance with John, who—much to the Bastard's frustration—prefers to give away some of his power rather than fight to keep all of it. Again, the predominant tone is amazement:

Mad world! Mad kings! Mad composition!
 John, to stop Arthur's title in the whole,
 Hath willingly departed with a part,
 And France, whose armor conscience buckled on,
 Whom zeal and charity brought to the field
 As God's own soldier, rounded in the ear
 With that same purpose-changer, that sly devil,
 That broker, that still breaks the pate of faith,
 That daily break-vow, he that wins of all,
 Of kings, of beggars, old men, young men, maids,
 Who, having no external thing to lose
 But the word “maid,” cheats the poor maid of that,
 That smooth-faced gentleman, tickling commodity . . .

[II.i.561–73]

Still Faulconbridge has not exhausted his supply of epithets and extended metaphors.

Commodity is “This bawd, this broker, this all-changing word” [II.i.582]. It is “the bias

of the world; / The world, who of itself is peised well, / Made to run even upon even
ground,

Till this advantage, this vile-drawing bias,
This sway of motion, this commodity,
Makes it take head from all indifferency,
From all direction, purpose, course, intent.

[II.i.574–80]

Had he not just witnessed such a scene, he would not have believed it. The crucial difference between Faulconbridge’s hyperboles and those already cited—the Dauphin’s response to military disaster, for instance, or Salisbury’s reaction to Arthur’s apparent murder—is that his are uttered in soliloquy. We may suppose that Lewis’s main goal is to save face in the wake of defeat (*We lost because we were fighting the greatest power ever assembled!*), or that Salisbury’s rhetoric serves to justify his intended flight from John (*We are not betraying our king; we are overthrowing a monster!*). Because Faulconbridge is alone onstage, with no need to maintain appearances, he may unpack his heart with increasingly wild words for no purpose but to better understand the “[m]ad world,” thick with “thorns and dangers,” into which he has thrust himself. Recalling the vow with which he concluded his earlier soliloquy, he aims “to learn . . . to avoid deceit” by learning what leads others “to deceive”; to ensure he will never himself be deceived by “tickling commodity,” he imagines it in every conceivable guise.

As in the moments following Arthur’s death, however, Faulconbridge’s efforts here seem to exhaust and dishearten him:

And why rail I on this commodity?
But for because he hath not wooed me yet.
Not that I have the power to clutch my hand
When his fair angels would salute my palm,

But for my hand, as unattempted yet,
Like a poor beggar, railleth on the rich.

[II.i.587–92]

The irony of predicting his own hypocrisy does not escape him; rather, it nudges him back to his natural good humor. “Well,” he concludes with gusto,

. . . whiles I am a beggar, I will rail
And say there is no sin but to be rich;
And being rich, my virtue then shall be
To say there is no vice but beggary.
Since kings break faith upon commodity,
Gain, be my lord, for I will worship thee!

[II.i.593–8]

But he has regained control of his mood; Faulconbridge can imitate a cynic, but he is never seriously tempted to break faith with king, country, or conscience, not even when they seem incompatible, as following Arthur’s apparent murder. Indeed, the worst sin Faulconbridge commits for John is to plunder a few monasteries to fund the war effort, a notion that Shakespeare’s predominantly Protestant audience likely applauded, especially considering the monasteries are represented onstage by the amoral Cardinal Pandulph. When, before the play’s final battle, Faulconbridge addresses the French and rebel English lords on John’s behalf (“For thus his royalty doth speak in me” [V.ii.129]), his speech is so potent, so stirring, I am nearly convinced, in spite of all I have witnessed, of the king’s virtues:

Know the gallant monarch is in arms,
And like an eagle o’er his aerie towers,
To souse annoyance that comes near his nest.
And you degenerate, you ingrate revolts,
You bloody Neroes, ripping up the womb
Of your dear mother England, blush for shame;
For your own ladies and pale-visaged maids
Like Amazons come tripping after drums,
Their thimbles into armed gauntlets change,
Their needles to lances, and their gentle hearts

To fierce and bloody inclination.

[V.ii.148–58]

Perhaps these lines—seconded by his prophetic closing remarks, already quoted above—reveal the true object of Faulconbridge’s loyalty: his mother country. This natural son of England is Shakespeare’s first—perhaps only—true patriot, a remarkably benign presence amidst the tumult of war and the intrigue of politics. Kings come and go, but a stable line of succession is the foremost way to preserve the kingdom. By play’s end John has been poisoned by his enemies, and Faulconbridge is first to pledge allegiance to the new king, John’s son Henry. In bequeathing his “faithful services / And true subjection everlastingly” [V.vii.104–5], Faulconbridge links the “lineal state” of Henry’s right to rule to “the glory of the land” [V.vii.102].

This mention of poison returns us to that first soliloquy, when Faulconbridge vowed to deliver “sweet poison for the age’s tooth.” What exactly might he have meant? Surely the Bastard’s poison is different in kind from the poison that kills John. The image suggests something both pleasing and insidious as it rots victims from within—from “the inward motion,” as Faulconbridge puts it. Flattery comes to mind, yet when is the Bastard obsequious? Harold Bloom equates this “poison” with truth [54], but that also doesn’t seem quite right. Would a society grown fat with lies welcome truth as a “sweet” purgative?

If we cannot tell, perhaps neither could Shakespeare—he never returns to develop this notion of “sweet poison.” For that matter, the Bastard’s show-stopping disquisition on Commodity is the only place in the play where that word appears. It is as though Shakespeare buried a much darker character in Faulconbridge—certainly a more conflicted one—only to leave him there as the plot thickened. Others have remarked that

King John seems divided into two very different halves: As A. R. Braunmuller describes, in his introduction to the Oxford edition of the play, “John triumphant and the Bastard detached in the first part, John indecisive and the Bastard confident in the second” [76].

“Confident” may be the wrong word. At least, I do not hear confidence as the Bastard prophesizes over the corpse of Arthur, snagged by “the thorns and dangers of this world”:

From forth this morsel of dead royalty
The life, the right and truth of all this realm
Is fled to heaven, and England now is left
To tug and scramble and to part by th’ teeth
The unowed interest of proud-swelling state.

[IV.iii.143–7]

Is Faulconbridge losing faith in the rightness of John’s cause? Of *any man’s* cause? His words begin to paint a disillusioned picture of kingship itself:

Now for the bare-picked bone of majesty
Doth dogged war bristle his angry crest
And snarleth in the gentle eyes of peace.
Now powers from home and discontents at home
Meet in one line, and vast confusion waits,
As doth a raven on a sick-fallen beast,
The imminent decay of wrested pomp.

[IV.iii.148–54]

Yet again these thoughts are not pursued, and Faulconbridge hurries off to John’s assistance. His vision of civil war is vivid, terrifying, but it is for England more than for any single person that he mourns. We might expect the Bastard to forsake politics as his king proves increasingly unworthy of support; instead, Shakespeare subtly shifts the grounds for loyalty from king to country. The result is a more vigorous, less multifaceted protagonist—a hero rather than a skeptic. For all his power to fascinate, Faulconbridge is not “a man whose every syllable makes him better understood than he was before” [Van

Doren, 97]. Such a man would devote a portion of his considerable energies toward understanding how the natural son of *Coeur de Lion* ended up in the camp of Shakespeare's least-engaging monarch,

John

John is no would-be saint in the manner of Henry VI; nor does he follow (precede?) Richard III in villainy. He lacks Richard II's command of language, Henry IV's command of occasion, and Henry V's command of men, though these qualities exist elsewhere in the play that bears his name—indeed, in a single character: Faulconbridge. By the time John effectively cedes his power (“Have thou the ordering of this present time,” he tells the Bastard [V.i.77]), his most consequential moments onstage have come with foot in mouth. It is John, not Faulconbridge, who “smacks of observation,” stuffing his speeches with the “form [and] outward accoutrement” of bravado gleaned from braver men (and women, lest we neglect his warlike mother, Eleanor). Indeed, John is as inauthentic as the Bastard is authentic. (Replace “authentic” with “legitimate” and we have an interesting contradiction—would England have fared better with a more natural leader, regardless of birthright?)

An appropriate question, for the play begins with the issue of succession. Not five lines have passed before the French ambassador refers to John's “borrowed majesty” [I.i.4], threatening war if the crown is not delivered to the “right royal sovereign” [I.i.15], Arthur. John fires back impressively:

Be thou as lightning in the eyes of France,
For, ere thou canst report, I will be there.
The thunder of my cannon shall be heard.
So, hence! Be thou the trumpet of our wrath
And sullen presage of your own decay.

[I.i.24–8]

But John cannot savor his wrath for long; no sooner does the ambassador exit than Eleanor rebukes her son for a prior failure of diplomacy:

This might have been prevented and made whole
With very easy arguments of love,
Which now the manage of two kingdoms must
With fearful bloody issue arbitrate.

[I.i.35–8]

For now John stands firm. “Our strong possession and our right for us,” he declares, and again his mother undermines his confidence: “Your strong possession much more than your right,” she murmurs, “Or else it must go wrong with you and me” [I.i.39–42].

Nevertheless, John proves willing to compromise: “the trumpet of our wrath” is soon muted by “arguments of love” (much to the Bastard’s disbelief, as we have seen). Rather than battle France for supremacy, John agrees to unite the two kingdoms under a hastily arranged marriage between his niece Blanche and the Dauphin. All appears well (unless your son’s name happens to be Arthur, but we’ll get to Constance soon enough), until the sudden entrance of Cardinal Pandulph, who demands to know why John, “against the church, our holy mother, / So willfully dost spurn; and force perforce / Keep Stephen Langton,² chosen Archbishop / Of Canterbury, from that holy see” [III.i.141–4].

John’s ranting reply is even less expected:

What earthy name to interrogatories
Can test the free breath of a sacred king?
Thou canst not, cardinal, devise a name
So slight, unworthy and ridiculous,
To charge me to an answer, as the pope.
Tell him this tale, and from the mouth of England
Add thus much more, that no Italian priest
Shall tithes or toll in our dominions,
But as we under God are supreme head,
So under him that great supremacy,

² The one and only time this man is mentioned.

Where we do reign, we will alone uphold,
 Without th' assistance of a mortal hand.
 So tell the pope, all reverence set apart
 To him and his usurped authority.

[III.i.147–60]

Apparently John is channeling Henry VIII. Note that Pandulph has not actually demanded Langton be archbishop (though presumably he would have)—he simply asks why John has ignored the Pope's wishes. Little matter once John dismisses the "Italian priest" as "ridiculous": He is promptly excommunicated, whereupon he finds the French don't share his radical view of the proper role of Catholicism in politics. Though King Philip begs the cardinal to "devise, ordain, impose / Some gentle order, and then we shall be blessed / To do your pleasure and continue friends" [III.i.250–2], he should instead be pleading with his fellow king. To achieve peace John has already given up his claim to "Volquessen, Touraine, Maine, / Poitiers, and Anjou, these five provinces, / . . . and this addition more, / Full thirty thousand marks of English coin" [II.i.527–30]—what is so special about the archbishopric of Canterbury? Shakespeare gives John no rationale but anachronistic Protestantism and stubborn pride, postures he abandons once the French invade and English lords defect. Confronted with the dual threat of civil and international war, John eagerly submits to Rome in exchange for Pandulph's help. "This inundation of mistempered humor / Rests by you only to be qualified" [V.i.12–13], he tells the cardinal, forgetting the more capable man already in his service: As the rebel Salisbury shall marvel, after Pandulph fails to dissuade the French from attacking, "That misbegotten devil, Faulconbridge, / In spite of spite, alone upholds the day" [V.iv.4–5].

John's other great miscalculation is to sentence helpless Arthur to death. Though Hubert disobeys the order, Arthur takes it upon himself to leap from a battlement, leaving

the king to look very guilty indeed. The actual “plotting” of the murder is the most chilling sequence in the play:

John: Death
Hubert: My lord?
John: A grave.
Hubert: He shall not live.
John: Enough.
 I could be merry now.

[III.iii.66–7]

The sequel to this conversation is rather less efficient. Left alone onstage, John achieves a rare moment of clarity: “There is no sure foundation set on blood,” he reflects. “No certain life achieved by others’ death” [IV.ii.104–5]. Then Hubert returns and John, believing Arthur dead and fearing he’ll be blamed, resorts to whining:

John: Why urgest thou so oft young Arthur’s death?
 Thy hand hath murdered him. I had a mighty cause
 To wish him dead, but thou hadst none to kill him.
Hubert: No had, my lord? Why, did you not provoke me?
John: It is the curse of kings to be attended
 By slaves that take their humors for a warrant
 To break within the bloody house of life,
 And on the winking of authority
 To understand a law, to know the meaning
 Of dangerous majesty, when, perchance, it frowns
 More upon humor than advised respect.
Hubert: Here is your hand and seal for what I did.

[IV.ii.204–15]

Hubert’s bluntness here is almost comical. Unable to revise history, John turns to personal attacks:

Hadst not thou been by,
 A fellow by the hand of nature marked,
 Quoted and signed to do a deed of shame,
 This murder had not come into my mind;
 But taking note of thy abhorred aspect,
 Finding thee fit for bloody villainy,
 Apt, liable to be employed in danger,
 I faintly broke with thee of Arthur’s death;

And thou, to be endeared to a king,
 Made it no conscience to destroy a prince.

[IV.ii.220–9]

Finally convinced he can tell John the truth (or just sick of people assuming he's evil because he's ugly), Hubert confesses he could not go through with the execution. John is overjoyed, though his apology to Hubert is more amusing than ameliorative. ("Forgive the comment that my passion made / Upon thy feature, for my rage was blind, / And foul imaginary eyes of blood / Presented thee more hideous than thou art" [IV.ii.263–6].) The king begs Hubert to "haste . . . to the peers! / Throw this report on their incensed rage, / And make them tame to their obedience" [IV.ii.260–2].

John's newfound faith in Hubert is curious. The man has just admitted to disobeying his king on a matter of principle. Never mind whether Hubert was *right* to disobey—is he really the best choice for another mission? Suppose the three proud lords Hubert is sent to placate convince him *their* principles are superior? More to the point, during this desperate hour, shouldn't John himself take the lead? Would not his words sound more contrite from his own mouth?

The answers to these questions are subjective, for sure. Yet it is difficult to leave this scene with any remaining respect for John. He is a bungler who lacks even the courage to own his bungling.

Arthur

On the subject of Arthur, I am tempted to give W. H. Auden the first and final word: "Little kids on stage are impossible. They should be drowned" [67]. The crucial Act Four scene between Arthur and Hubert is Shakespeare at his most cloying. The plot to murder the young prince seems to have evolved since John kinda-sorta-proposed it in

Act Three: Now Hubert must also (only?) burn out Arthur's eyes with heated irons—for no apparent purpose but to ratchet up the melodrama.

“I would to God / I were your son, so you would love me, Hubert” [IV.i.23–4], Arthur confesses upon entering, and Hubert turns pale, prompting the selfless cherub to wish “you were a little sick, / That I might sit all night and watch with you” [IV.i.29–30]. Like a villain in a James Bond movie, Hubert proceeds to tell Arthur exactly what horrors lie in store; in reply, Arthur lays it on so thick I'd be happy just to see him gagged for the rest of the play:

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 cheered 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 lain still,
And ne'er have spoke a loving word to you,
But you at your sick service had a prince.

[IV.i.41–52]

These lines might be palatable if Arthur were merely feigning love to save himself. But it is difficult to imagine a grown man, a willing assassin, falling for such a performance were it not sincere, and besides, Arthur anticipates this objection: “Nay, you may think my love was crafty love, / And call it cunning; do and if you will. / If heaven be pleased that you must use me ill, / Why then you must” [IV.i.53–6].

It is easy to pick on poor Arthur, whose only crime is humorlessness. Yet he finds himself at the center of a sequence so apparently absurd I worry I've missed something. Arthur wrings enough sympathy from Hubert not only to save his life but to win Hubert's

protection; the prince falls asleep “doubtless and secure / That Hubert for the wealth of all the world / Will not offend thee” [IV.i.130–2]. When next we see Hubert he is lying to John about the “murder,” until he realizes John is remorseful and exclaims, “Young Arthur is alive. This hand of mine / Is yet a maiden and an innocent hand, / Not painted with the crimson spots of blood” [IV.ii.251–3]. Hubert speeds off to spread the happy news through the kingdom; the scene changes, and we are confronted with the incongruous spectacle of Arthur atop the walls of his prison, preparing to make the jump that ends up killing him. Arthur explicitly recognizes the risk: “As good to die and go, as die and stay,” he rationalizes [IV.iii.8]. But when did these become his only options? How long has it been since Hubert reassured Arthur his life is safe? As usual Shakespeare telescopes events, both historical and unhistorical, so that little time seems to have passed; only one scene separates Hubert’s change of heart from Arthur’s sudden death. It seems impossible to think Hubert agreed to such a dangerous escape plan, but if Arthur is acting on his own, where did he get the “shipboy’s semblance” he is wearing [IV.iii.4]? And why would he act on his own when he has professed such devotion to Hubert?

These questions too are unanswerable—and very distracting. Ockham’s razor suggests the historical John had Arthur murdered. But the fictional John is no Richard Crookback; his play is constructed to support the noble Faulconbridge, who would seem rather less noble serving a child-killer. Shakespeare thus had to find a way to kill Arthur that implicates John without actually making him responsible. The greatest of playwrights solved countless dramaturgical problems in his career. Unfortunately, Arthur was not among them. At least for me, neither was Arthur’s mother,

Constance

In Constance's bottomless grief Shakespeare leaves behind a certain mode of being. As Mark Van Doren writes, "She is the last and most terrible of Shakespeare's wailing women, she is the point to which the line that begins with Lucrece and extends through "Richard III" has been so straightly drawn" [91]. Constance at her most terrible transcends mere wailing—she becomes a preacher of annihilation. As she enters, dazed, following the capture of her son, Philip of France calls her "[a] grave unto a soul, / Holding th' eternal spirit, against her will" [III.iv.17–8]; Constance's own words suggest a more physical, even sensual, relationship with the Reaper:

O, amiable, lovely death!
 Thou odoriferous stench! Sound rottenness!
 Arise forth from the couch of lasting night,
 Thou hate and terror to prosperity,
 And I will kiss thy detestable bones,
 And put my eyeballs in thy vaulty brows,
 And ring these fingers with thy household worms,
 And stop this gap of breath with fulsome dust,
 And be a carrion monster like thyself.
 Come, grin on me, and I will think thou smil'st
 And buss thee as thy wife!

[III.iv.25–35]

Indeed, Death alone may be able to stop her mouth; till then, she imagines it feeding on her once "gracious" child:

But now will canker sorrow eat my bud
 And chase the native beauty from his cheek,
 And he will look as hollow as a ghost,
 As dim and meager as an ague's fit,
 And so he'll die; and rising so again,
 When I shall meet him in the court of heaven
 I shall not know him.

[III.iv.81–8]

The imagery evokes an earlier moment, when Arthur bids his mother “be content” [III.i.42], though they have been betrayed by Philip. Her grim reply exposes the devouring void in Constance, who loves nothing—*recognizes* nothing—save what pleases her:

If thou that bid'st me be content wert grim,
Ugly and slanderous to thy mother's womb,
Full of unpleasing blots and sightless stains,
Lame, foolish, crooked, swart, prodigious,
Patched with foul moles and eye-offending marks,
I would not care, I then would be content,
For then I should not love thee; no, nor thou
Become thy great birth, nor deserve a crown.

[III.i.43–50]

Constance is hardly the first Shakespearean proponent of the view that the outer man mirrors the inner—the misshapen Richard III makes a career of sending up (and reaffirming) this prejudice. Still, few characters so completely remake the world in the image of their tortured souls. Even her most insistently rational lines mock themselves:

I am not mad; this hair I tear is mine.
My name is Constance; I was Geoffrey's wife.
Young Arthur is my son, and he is lost!
I am not mad. I would to God I were,
For then 'tis like I should forget myself.
O, if I could, what grief should I forget!
Preach some philosophy to make me mad,
And thou shalt be canonized, cardinal.
For, being not mad but sensible of grief,
My reasonable part produces reason
How I may be delivered of these woes,
And teaches me to kill or hang myself.
If I were mad, I should forget my son,
Or madly think a babe of clouts were he.
I am not mad. Too well, too well I feel
The different plague of each calamity.

[III.iv.45–60]

“You are as fond of grief as of your child,” Philip observes [III.iv.92], but he doesn’t go far enough: Constance has already consigned Arthur to ruin, and taking his place are grief, madness, anything that “fills the room up of my absent child, / Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me, / Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words, / Remembers me of all his gracious parts, / Stuffs out his vacant garments with his form” [III.iv.93–7].

Constance exhausts me. Like Queen Margaret in the *Henry VI* plays, she would rather bemoan her fate than confront her prime role in making it. Her speeches, though as rich and memorable as anything in the play, drip with self-pity, and I wonder whether some sense of poetic justice moved Shakespeare to spend fewer than three lines on her death. “The first of April died / Your noble mother,” a messenger tells John, “and, as I hear, my lord, / The Lady Constance in a frenzy died / Three days before” [IV.ii.120–3]. John replies (eventually), “What! Mother dead!” (IV.ii.127), and Constance is never mentioned again.

* * * * *

Here we return to the question with which I began this essay: Why does everyone in *King John* fail to recognize familiar ground? The Bastard more than anyone is our guide through the play. Why is he continually amazed by behavior—self-interested scheming, vow-breaking, murder—that has become par for Shakespearean history? After three plays about Henry VI and one about Richard III, what did Shakespeare still want to say about England’s bloody past? Of course, this assumes *King John* followed the aforementioned plays, but Faulconbridge is too sophisticated a role for me to think otherwise and, as Van Doren notes, Constance seems the culmination of a very specific type.

For all its familiarity, *King John* occupies a unique place in Shakespeare: It is the only history not concerned with the causes and consequences of the Wars of the Roses. (The protagonist of *Henry VIII*, written at the end of Shakespeare's career, is the son of the man who defeated Richard III at Bosworth field.) Sandwiched between the earlier *Henry VI* plays (with which it shares a tendency toward declamatory verse) and the later *Henry IV-Henry V* plays (with which it shares an attraction to society's margins), *King John* as a whole seems unsure where to go. That its characters often behave similarly is appropriate, if not always artful.

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