

“Such Gentle Lambs”: Politics/Poetics of Mourning the Children in *Richard III*

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Shakespeare’s Richard III may be seen as a case study of how lives and deaths of children are juggled as an aesthetic agenda in collusion with (and/or as an exposé of) the dominant adult discourses that deny children agency and discount their individuality. The act of mourning for the children may be just another way of interpellating them. Whereas it is the political contingency of the Tudor myth that dictates the killing of Arthur and York, it is also necessary to correlate the fashioning of these children’s death to the cultural status of early modern children, to the crisis over the Protestant reformulation of afterlife and repudiation of idolatry, and also, to the demands of the theatrical idiom that condition the re-presented death and mourning.

Key words: Shakespeare, theatre, history, politics, children, death, mourning.

1. Introduction

Six characters of the Shakespeare canon who die young are undoubtedly “children” as regards their station in the *cursus aetatis* – Rutland in *3 Henry VI*, the little Duke of York and Prince Edward in *Richard III*, Arthur in *King John*, Young Macduff in *Macbeth*, and Mamillius in *The Winter’s Tale*. One is not sure about the age originally meant for Prince Edward in *3 Henry VI*, and for Young Siward in *Macbeth*, but they too die prematurely. These children do not succumb to any disease or natural causes which accounted for the high child mortality in Shakespeare’s England, but they are victims of political hostility (deep psychological trauma in the case of Mamillius).

These are all significant deaths inasmuch as they are mourned and commented upon by other characters, thus contributing to the narrative/emotive thrust of the plays in which they appear.¹ Out of these, *The Tragedy of King Richard the Third* is most insistently preoccupied with the killing of children. It features the offstage murder of two children, besides recalling the slaughter of two more young people, Rutland and Prince Edward, which occurs in the thematically preceding play of the first tetralogy – *The Third Part of Henry the Sixth* (the title of the earliest published version, *The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York and the Good King Henry the Sixth*, has been retained by the Oxford editors).

¹ A less significant death is that of the Boy, Falstaff’s former page in *Henry V*, who gets caught in the Anglo-French war. He is also a child or young adult, but his plebeian origin and menial status necessitate that his death is not made much of. Unlike his noble counterparts mentioned above, his death does not attract mourning and is hardly acknowledged. Captains Fluellen and Gower briefly mention that the retreating French army has treacherously killed all the defenceless English boys (including the anonymous Boy) who were guarding the luggage (4.7.1-5). The emphasis is not on the plight of the boys but on the baseness of the French. Then ensues a comic conversation between the two.

Why do these children have to die? They are caught in the vortex of dynastic strife and vengeance, which from a certain factional vantage can be aligned with the retributive justice of God, and may be finally related to the political contingency of the Tudor myth. More immediately, the death of these children serves the narrative purpose of arousing pity and indignation, thus making for good theatre. Just as the plays enlist the deaths of children as political/poetic devices, within the fictional economy of the plays themselves the deaths seem to make sense only so far as they re-present adult concerns. As their lives and acts, the deaths of children are liable to be appropriated by patriarchal, gerontocratic discourses that fail to recognize children as individual agents. These deaths are more than fictional, provisional events; they are culturally freighted and affectively charged signifiers which can exceed the ideologies that the play may officially embody. This article seeks to tease out how the death of children and the modalities of mourning them in *Richard III* may constitute a greater politics of re-presentation, while also interrogating whether the play is inherently programmed to betray and undercut such foundational schemes.

2. Too Many and Too Young to be Mourned?

To begin with, it may be helpful to review the material/cultural status of child mortality in early modern England. The idea of *cursus aetatis* (course of ages) presupposes an average life span. According to biblical authority, life expectancy of man is seventy years: “The days of our years are three score years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away” (Psalm 90:10). Such an estimate was more of a fantasy in early modern England where the average life span was around half that figure (Bucholz and Key, 2009: 16). What is more, 34.4 per cent of total deaths occurred to children rather than old people (Wrightson, 1982: 105). Infant mortality was no doubt appallingly high. Mean infant mortality estimates based on family reconstitution studies for 8 parishes of England in 1550-1649 show that out of every thousand, 137 boys and 120 girls failed to reach one year of age. The mortality (per thousand) for children of 1-4 years of age was 83 for boys and 80 for girls. In the case of children 5-9 years of age, the rate was 38 for boys and 35 for girls (Schofield and Wrigley, 1979: 66). Another estimate shows that, throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries 12 or 13 percent of the children died in the first year of life, around 9 per cent within the first month, 5 per cent within a week and 2 per cent within a day (Cressy, 1999: 117). The most dramatic and shocking deviation from *tempestivitas* (seasonableness, or expected concord of physiological/behavioral condition with bodily age) would be to terminate the *cursus aetatis* itself with premature and abrupt death. But that happened too often in Shakespeare’s England to relegate the occurrence to the field of theory (Pinchbeck 1956). How did one cope with the fact of child mortality, and what bearing does it have on theatrical representation of children dying or being sent to death?

Philippe Ariès (1962), who pioneered the social constructionist view of childhood, argues that children in medieval Europe were seen as miniature (hence deficient) adults, and that the concept of childhood as different from the adult state gained wide acceptance only in the seventeenth century—that too in the upper echelons

of the society. Ariès further posits that in the Middle Ages parents and caregivers were indifferent to the infants, or deliberately cultivated a callousness towards them, since infant mortality rate was very high. Citing instances from Montaigne and Molière, Ariès argues that children below the age of seven “did not count” (1962: 128) even in the seventeenth century. Ariès observes elsewhere that the children who died “too soon” were buried in the backyard like a cat or dog. Even the children of the rich were treated as paupers in that they were buried outdoors often in common graves, whereas the European upper classes between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries preferred to be interred in the church itself (1983: 82, 90). Only when the survival of the child was assured (around the age of seven), people felt it worthwhile to invest emotional energy in them. Similarly, Lawrence Stone claims that, “It was very rash for [early modern English] parents to get too emotionally concerned about creatures whose expectation of life was so very low” (1977: 70).

Given such dismal enunciations, is the death of a child in a Shakespeare play symptomatic of the alleged indifference towards children? Or, by the same token, is it the function of a cultural consensus that such an event is inherently fraught with *pathos*? Moreover, how far is an artistic commodity implicated in the dominant discourse and how far does it try to extend the horizon of experience? At least, the representation of children in the Shakespeare canon instantiates a lively communal interest in the embodied presence and mimetic performance of children. If these child characters are not commensurable with the influential reconstructions (themselves keenly contested) of early modern childhood(s), they also prompt the question whether theatre constituted an autonomous space that had the liberty to invert or complement dominant cultural expectations.

On the other hand, several historians in direct resistance to Ariès’s and Stone’s theses have adduced evidence to prove that early modern children, down from infancy, were much loved and cared for. Besides, the high mortality might also mean that parents would be more intensely concerned about their children’s welfare. Wrightson (1982: 104-18) locates in the diaries of Ralph Josselin (clergyman, 1616-83), Adam Martindale (yeoman, 1623-86) and Henry Newcome (nonconformist preacher, 1627-95) patent traces of anxiety and solicitude for their children. Similarly, Linda Pollock (1983: 96-142) studies the diaries of a number of parents, from the baronet William Brownlow (1594-1675) to the shopkeeper Nehemiah Wallington (1598-1658), to show that the death of their children left them shattered.² In addition, Clare Gittings (1984: 80-83) argues that children in pre-industrial England were subject to much the same funerary practices as the adults, and that the comparative lack of ceremony in the funerals of children may be traced to genuine grief of the parents rather than their indifference.

² There can be located in the Shakespeare canon at least five infants or babes in arms who are presented on the stage – Prince Edward in *3 Henry VI*, Aaron’s bastard son in *Titus Andronicus*, Marina in *Pericles*, Perdita in *The Winter’s Tale*, and Elizabeth in *Henry VIII*. With the exception of Leontes, the parents of these children show much affection and attachment to them. Allowance should be made for the fact that Leontes doubted the paternity of Perdita and that he shows no lack of fondness for his son Mamillius. In *Titus Andronicus*, it is noteworthy that the otherwise inhuman “moor” Aaron is overflowing with affection for his newborn son, the product of his clandestine relationship with the empress Tamora.

Further, material evidence dating from late medieval England illustrates the attachment of parents to deceased infants. Will Coster (2000: 276) mentions several memorial images of children wrapped in chrisom cloths, shrouds or swaddling bands attached with rope or pins. Mention may be made of a funerary brass appearing in Upper Deal, Kent that shows an infant wrapped in a single sheet secured with bindings. It commemorates one Anne Constant, her Latin epitaph reading in translation, “I who so soon departed this life have so soon begun to live, and I who but now was as nothing, have become one of heaven’s company.” She was the only child of the headmaster of King’s School, Rochester after a marriage of thirteen years, and died aged only thirty-one days on 20 July 1606 (Coster, 2000: 280). The inscription suggests that the parents mourned the newborn and tried to seek solace in the hope of her otherworldly welfare. The terms of the epitaph recall the fourteenth-century dream allegory *Pearl*, where the poet-speaker’s daughter, having died when she was hardly two years of age, appears in his vision as a grown woman who figures among the virgin brides of Christ in the Heavenly City. The Christian eschatological idiom in which the consolation is couched in this case was foreign to the early modern stage owing to strictures of religious censorship, and children who die in the early modern plays call for a mourning that lies beyond such neat, formulaic consolation. The narrative motivation of such deaths, as in the case of the children in *Richard III*, is to disturb the audiences and arouse strong feelings in them.³

3. Mourning by/through the Book

Some literary works of a patently autobiographical origin indicate parental affection for dead children. The most famous example of poetic mourning for a dead child from this period would be Ben Jonson’s touching epigram “On My First Son.” Less famous, but equally compelling is Jonson’s epigram “On My First Daughter” which commemorates a six month old infant. As in the case of Anne Constant’s epitaph, the bereaved parents here seek solace in the thought of the infant’s otherworldly happiness—hoping that the girl’s namesake, the Mother of God, has kindly given her sanctuary.

A more complex and learned literary exercise in mourning may be located in Anne Cecil de Vere’s brief sonnet sequence entitled “Foure epytaphes, made by the Countess of Oxenford, after the death of her young Sonne, the Lord Bulbecke, &c.,” published in John Soowthern’s *Pandora* (1584). The sequence commemorates the countess’ son who died within three weeks of his birth (Phillippy, 2007: 96). The final fragment that concludes the sequence has a startling imagery:

³ As regards infanticide in the ancient world, John Boswell (1984) has argued that the misconception about its prevalence has arisen from the mistranslation of the word *expositio*, which meant “putting out” and not “exposure with a view to killing.” Parents would abandon an unwanted child at a Roman *lactaria*, from where they would be gratefully adopted by childless people as the “kindness of strangers.” During the Middle Ages the Church, along with various monastic orders, assumed the role of sheltering unwanted children.

Amphion's wife was turned to a rock.
How well I had beene, had I had such adventure,
For then I might againe have been the Sepulchre,
Of him that I bare in mee, so long ago. (ll. 11-14; quoted in Phillippy 2007: 98-9)

Here the poet-mother wants to become a second Niobe (who metamorphosed into stone out of grief at the death of her fourteen children) so that she can physically enclose her dead child like a monument.

This raises the time-honoured question regarding the sincerity of literary mourning. Dr Johnson famously objected to the traditional machinery of pastoral elegy in Milton's "Lycidas," remarking, "Where there is leisure for fiction there is little grief" (1905: 163). His contention is usually countered by citing the essential artificiality of the literary medium itself. It is further argued that the use of metre, rhyme and rhetoric together with the conventional markers of genre helps to place within a formal (thus tending to be collective) idiom a sentiment that may be personal in origin. Related to this issue is the question more relevant to the present study, that is, how far dramatic representation refers to the lived experience, and how far it contrives and/or elides affect for the sake of stylization.

It must be remembered that the deaths of children staged in the plays of the Shakespeare canon (and the reaction to them) operate within a contrived, formalized idiom that hardly enables unmediated access to personal feeling and intention. Moreover, the commercial setting of early modern public theatre necessitated that the deaths of these children are literally put on *sale*—deployed and manipulated in a way as to elicit maximum revenue. Critics since the nineteenth-century have often tried to relate Shakespeare's plays to his biography, tracing the bitter, gloomy note arising in his work in the late 1590s to the death of his eleven years old son Hamnet in 1596 (Wheeler 2000). But did the early modern scene really allow a playwright to parade the vicissitudes of his personal fortune in his plays, when the primary impulse was to survive in the fiercely competitive and insecure realm of professional theatre? It is not safe to deduce the general tendencies of the culture from the deaths of children staged in Shakespeare's theatre, but it is clear that such deaths had a certain emotional/aesthetic appeal for the play-going audiences (several of whom might have personally experienced such bereavement) which the canny playwright would readily take into account. The formulaic, run-of-the-mill tear-jerker presupposes some vestige of real-life affect.

4. The Sin of the Fathers and Anti-mourning

The killing of the children in *Richard III* needs to be situated in the politics of Tudor historiography that informs the play. This in fact rationalizes the opposite reaction—how the occasion of a child's killing may elicit the obverse of mourning or anti-mourning from certain characters caught up in a web of dynastic *agon*. E. M. W. Tillyard (1969: 36-60) has located in the two tetralogies ascribed to Shakespeare an unconditional, unproblematic replication of the Tudor myth. As constructed and propagated by sixteenth-century historians like Polydore Vergil, Sir Thomas More, Edward Hall and Raphael Holinshed, the myth tried to endorse the line of Henry VII by evoking retributive

justice and providential design in its favour. It is summarized thus by A. P. Rossiter in his classic reckoning of *Richard III*:

England rests under a chronic curse—the curse of faction, civil dissension and fundamental anarchy, resulting from the deposition and murder of the Lord’s Anointed (Richard II) and the usurpation of the House of Lancaster. The savageries of the Wars of the Roses follow logically (almost theologically) from that; and Elizabeth’s ‘All-seeing heaven, what a world is this!’ [2.1.83] says but half. (1992: 6)

This is the only justification, makeshift and unsatisfactory as it is, for the murder of children like Rutland, Edward and York who are too young to offend and personally merit retribution. Rossiter places the children in the last of the three groups that labour under the sin of the fathers:

It is a world of absolute hereditary moral ill, in which *everyone* (till the appearance of Richmond-Tudor in Act V) is tainted with the treacheries, the blood and the barbarities of civil strife, and internally blasted with the cause of a moral anarchy which leaves but three human genera: the strong in evil, the feebly wicked and the helplessly guilt-tainted (such as the Princes, Anne – all those despairing, lamenting women, whose choric wailings are a penitential psalm of guilt, and sorrow: England’s guilt, the individual’s sorrow). (1992: 6-7; emphasis original)

There may be identified an additional sin which the princes in the Tower inherited. King Edward IV broke the oath he made when, after coming back from Burgundy, he said that he wanted nothing but his Yorkist possessions, and many thought that the murder of his young sons in the Tower was the result of this perfidy (Sen Gupta, 1964: 95). However, the play offers several resistances to an unqualified acceptance of the Tudor myth and the idea of divine vengeance which it stages.

The concept of trans-generational retribution has its provenance in the Old Testament. Among the Ten Commandments appears Yahweh’s pronouncement: “I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me” (Exodus 20:5). There are similar declarations in Exodus 43:7, Deuteronomy 5:9 and Numbers 14:18. But biblical authority can also be cited to counter this sentiment. Ezekiel, for instance, comments on the old Jewish proverb, “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge,” and propounds a doctrine of individual moral accountability:

doth not the son bear the iniquity of the father? When the son hath done that which is lawful and right, and hath kept all my statutes, and hath done them, he shall surely live. The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him. (Ezekiel 18:19-20)

LORD HASTINGS [*to Margaret*] O 'twas the foulest deed to slay that babe,
And the most merciless that e'er was heard of.

RIVERS [*to Margaret*] Tyrants themselves wept when it was reported.
(1.3.179-82)

Margaret is not so convinced, and wonders about the balance between the sin and the punishment. Her musing only suggests that it is the victorious or the more privileged that has the ultimate authority to define God's intention.

Did York's dread curse prevail so much with heaven,
That Henry's [her husband Henry VI's] death, my lovely Edward's death,
Their kingdom's loss, my woeful banishment,
Should all but answer for that peevish brat [Rutland]? (1.3.188-92)

She then capitalizes on this concept of divine retribution to launch a volley of maledictions against the house of York and its associates. She begins thus:

Though not by war, by surfeit die your king,
As ours by murder to make him a king.
[To Elizabeth] *Edward thy son, that now is Prince of Wales,*
For Edward my son, that was Prince of Wales,
Die in his youth by like untimely violence. (1.3.194-98; emphases added)

After the princes in the Tower are murdered and thus Margaret's curse on Edward, the Prince of Wales is fulfilled, she triumphantly attempts a stock-taking of sin and retribution like the one which the Yorkists had practised earlier to her disadvantage:

Tell o'er your [Queen Elizabeth's] woes by viewing mine.
I had an Edward, till a Richard killed him;
I had a husband, till a Richard killed him.
[To Elizabeth] *Thou hadst an Edward, till a Richard killed him;*
Thou hadst a Richard [the young Duke of York], till a Richard killed him.
(4.4.39-43; emphases added)

Margaret feels empowered by the fulfilment of her prophecy to match measure for measure. She had not called for the death of the young York, a fact she turns into advantage for herself. According to her perverse reasoning, this proves the additional value of her murdered son, for the deaths of Edward and York together balance Edward's killing:

Thy [the Duchess of York's] Edward [Edward IV], he is dead, that killed my Edward;
Thy other Edward [the Prince of Wales] dead, to quite my Edward;
Young York, he is but boot, because both they
Matched not the high perfection of my loss (4.4.63-66; emphases added)

Although Margaret aspires to the authority of a prophetess (1.3.299), she is none. Her dealings with the future are not disinterested as in the archetypal cases of Cassandra and the Sibyls, and there is no hint in the play that she enjoys either divine approbation or occult powers. Her prophecies are curses, all coloured with heartache, envy, malice and desperation—as the play amply highlights through her long, hysterical tirades. Moreover, she is as guilty as the subjects of her curse. The fact that the play makes such a biased and tainted character the chief exponent of trans-generational retribution suggests that it does not take the concept for granted. A similar case is to be found in *The Life and Death of King John*, where Constance recalls the Second Commandment in order to insult Queen Eleanor:

This [Arthur] is thy eld'st son's son,
Infortunate in nothing but in thee.
Thy sins are visited in this poor child;
The canon of the law is laid on him.
Being but the second generation
Removed from thy sin-conceiving womb. (2.1.177-82)

... he [Arthur] is not only plaguèd for her sin,
But God hath made her sin and her the plague
On this removed issue, plaguèd for her
And with her plague; her sin his injury,
Her injury the beadle to her sin;
All punished in the person of this child,
And all for her. A plague upon her! (2.1.184-90)

Again, Constance is a strongly biased observer, motivated against Eleanor whom she tries to hurt. The fact that the concept of trans-generational perdition is used by an enraged woman as a tool against her opponent during a slanging match suggests that it is not to be taken as sacrosanct. That Shakespeare was aware of the lighter side of the question is amply illustrated by the lengthiest discussion on the “sins of the father” theme in the canon, which appears in a context of coarse banter (*The Merchant of Venice*, 3.5.1-14). Lancelot tells Jessica that she could hope to dodge her father Shylock's sins only if she were a bastard, but then again she would be tainted by her mother's sexual transgression.

5. The Tyrant as Traditional Infanticide

Several critics have described the role of Richard with respect to this scheme of divine vengeance. As Rossiter states:

he is not only this demon incarnate, he is in effect God's agent in a predetermined plan of divine retribution: the 'scourge of God'. Now, by Tudor-Christian historical principles, this plan is *right*. Thus, in a real sense, Richard is a King

who 'can do no wrong'; for in the pattern of the justice of divine retribution on the wicked, he functions as an avenging angel. (1992: 20)

This is why Rossiter gives him the paradoxical title "Angel with Horns." Lily B. Campbell confirms, "God may and often does make use of an evil instrument in the execution of his divine vengeance, and Richard, like Tamburlaine, functions as the scourge of God" (1964: 313). But the fact remains that Richard is evil, he is a tyrant. While he serves to wash away all the sinners in the house of York, he himself has to be exterminated to fulfill the teleology intended by the Tudor myth.⁴ He happens to be an anointed king, and it is necessary to show him as a tyrant in order to legitimize and justify his killing and replacement by Richmond.

One easy way of doing this is to associate him with the killing of children. The murder of the princes in the Tower is a shadowy and uncertain event, which Tudor historiography purposefully attributed to Richard in order to malign him. This is also in keeping with the convention of the stage tyrant. Catherine Belsey points out as much:

The slaughter of innocent children was the traditional mark of the tyrant. His projected murder of Prince Arthur establishes the rapacity of Shakespeare's King John. Thomas Preston's *Cambises*, printed in 1569, shows the despotic king shoot an arrow into the heart of a child to prove that he is not incapacitated by drink. At the beginning of *The Battle of Alcazar* (1588-9) the bloodthirsty usurper, Muly Mahamet, smothers his two young brothers in their bed. And the mounting violence of Macbeth's reign is demonstrated by his butchery of Macduff's wife and children, including the engaging little 'prattler' who teases his mother (*Macbeth* 4.2.64). (2007: 35)

Belsey further illustrates the biblical provenance of the trope where the tyrant is an infanticide:

These tyrants are descended ultimately from Herod, who gave orders for the extermination of all boys under two when the Wise Men brought him news of the birth of the new king he perceived as a rival (Matt. 2.1-18). Shakespeare

⁴ Richmond is also an avenger, but with a difference. In the Deuteronomy 32:35, the Lord says: "To me belongeth vengeance and recompence." Likewise, St Paul exhorts in Romans 12:19, "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord." As Kerrigan (1996: 119-20) has shown, this verse, and the sentiment reflected by it, could be exploited to fashion an individual as the agent of God's vengeance. From this point of view, the avenger will not be tainted by the sin usually attendant upon blood feud and regicide. Significantly, Richmond identifies himself and his army as God's agents during his prayer on the eve of the battle: "O thou [God], whose captain I account myself, / ... Make us thy ministers of chastisement, / That we may praise thee in the victory" (5.5.61, 66-67). If the subject of vengeance is a tyrant, the act is not a sin but one of deliverance. Tudor historiography showed Richmond in this quasi-messianic light. *Richard III* mostly uses the pattern, as is evident from Henry VII's triumphalist proclamation that ends the play.

definitely assumed that he could count on his audience to know the story, since Henry V threatens the citizens of Harfleur with appalling brutalities, including

Your naked infants spitted upon pikes,
Whiles the mad mothers with their howls confused
Do break the clouds, as did the wives of Jewry
At Herod's bloody-hunting slaughtermen.
(*Henry V*, 3.3.115-18)

Herod owed some of his familiarity to the mystery play cycles. Shakespeare might possibly have seen the pageant of the Shearmen and Tailors, which was performed in Coventry into the 1580s. There the mothers cling desperately to their babies, and when the soldiers carry out their orders nonetheless, the women lament bitterly. (2007: 35-36)

Richard's sin against the princes in the Tower weighs heavy on him, as in the crucial night before the Battle of Bosworth Field the ghosts of the boys disturb his sleep and cheer up his adversary Richmond:

Dream on thy cousins, smothered in the Tower.
Let us be lead within thy bosom, Richard,
And weigh thee down to ruin, shame, and death.
Thy nephews' souls bid thee despair and die.
(To Richmond) Sleep, Richmond, sleep in peace and wake in joy.
Good angels guard thee from the boar's annoy.
Live, and beget a happy race of kings!
Edward's unhappy sons do bid thee flourish. (5.5.99-107)

The ghosts are not meant to be figments of either Richard's or Richmond's imagination, they would have a living presence in the belief of an early modern audience. The ghosts of the princes would be played by the same child actors who played the princes, but some sort of costume or make-up would signal that they now belong to a different level of existence. Death is a great leveller which has liberated the boys from their childish debility, dependence and lack of discernment. The souls of the boys exercise their newly attained adult-like authority by participating in the family feud. In the play's scheme of things children are passive sufferers—whatever autonomy they enjoy does not allow them to defend themselves from adult manipulations and shape their own lives.⁵ This play suggests that they can undergo a sea change only through death, that too in a specific context, and only to endorse a scheme determined by adults.

⁵ One may compare with this the cases of the young Edward III in Marlowe's *Edward II* (written around 1592), Giovanni in Webster's *The White Devil* (first performed 1612) and Antonio's son in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (first performed 1613-14). While Antonio's son, a silent child, is paraded by his adult well-wishers as the future ruler of Malfi (5.5.130), Edward III and Giovanni play more decisive political roles.

6. The Comic Villain and the Black Humour of Infanticide

One remarkable development in *The Tragedy of King Richard the Third* is the fashioning of the comic villain as the protagonist, unprecedented in the Shakespeare canon and not seen in the sources for this play. Richard is a supremely self-conscious actor revelling in his own acting, and his wry wit together with his histrionic skills becomes manifest over the issue of the princes in the Tower. When Prince Edward makes the pretentious speech about truth living from age to age through oral transmission, Richard comments sardonically in a brief aside, “So wise so young, they say, do never live long” (3.1.79). While he recalls the folk wisdom about precocious children, he also thus hints at his plan of killing the child to clear his way to the crown. He conflates the early death, thought to be a natural outcome for the physiological imbalance in a *puer senex* (child sage), with the violent death he has planned for the child. The joke lies in this displacement of meaning, and in the fact that the boy who parades his wisdom fails to sense the palpable conspiracy against his life.

When the boy demands, “What say you, uncle?” Richard states, “I say, ‘Without characters fame lives long’” (3.1.80-81). He then goes into another aside, “Thus like the formal Vice, Iniquity, / I moralize two meanings in one word” (3.1.82-83). Thus Richard again hints at the death awaiting the boy, and comments metatheatrically on the origin of his own character from the mocking Vice of Tudor Morality plays. Further, when Edward spells out his plan to recover the English territories in France as an adult, Richard observes with relish in an aside, “Short summers lightly have a forward spring” (3.1.94). The killing of a child, shown to be a shocking sin in other parts of the play, is for him a much awaited event, and his charisma as a Vice-like comic villain ensures that the audiences are drawn into an amoral enjoyment of his manipulative ways. True, the little Duke of York in Act 3, scene 1 engages in a lively banter with Richard and makes several snide remarks much to his discomfiture. But York’s verbal resistance to his uncle arises out of the fact that he cannot gauge Richard’s malicious intent. In the context of theatre, his childish/childlike cheekiness helps to endear York to the audience so that his murder appears as a great affective blow.

His histrionic skills come to the fore in the long interaction when he persuades the mourning Queen Elizabeth Woodville to agree to a bizarre match between him and her daughter (who was originally intended for Richmond and ultimately becomes his). As Elizabeth accuses forthright, “... thou didst kill my children” (4.4.353), he does not deny the charge, but conjures up a fantastic resurrection for the boys which is posited on his own procreative abilities: “But in your daughter’s womb I bury them, / Where, in that nest of spicery, they will breed / Selves of themselves, to your recomfiture” (4.4.354-56). The image of the nest of spicery evokes the connection of the phoenix, the mythical bird which burns itself in a pyre of spices and then rises from its own relics. Richard does not explain why he is the best person to regenerate the boys in their sister’s womb. However, the implicit logic (an especially warped one) seems to be that, since Richard has taken away the lives he must make up for them—through his sexual prowess. This reasoning is fraught with potentials of dark comedy.

That Elizabeth should readily accede to his proposal and go about persuading her daughter may not be convincing to the modern reader. (Was ever mourning woman in this humour consoled? Was ever mourning woman in this humor won?) The upshot is

perhaps the most grotesque treatment of the theme of mourning in early modern drama. But the black humour of the scene becomes apparent when after her exit Richard calls Elizabeth a “Relenting fool, and shallow, changing woman” (4.4.362). Richard is a Machiavel who can juggle the lives and deaths of children for his political gains. In the broader context of early modern dramaturgy in general, children (or rather, textual and scenic effects organized under the sign of a child) are, in fact, similarly juggled for particular narrative or aesthetic purposes.

7. The Theatrics of Mourning

In the play strong child-centric affect is staged through the lamentations of Queen Elizabeth Woodville for the princes in the Tower. Coming late in a play punctuated by the lamentations and complaints of bereaved women like Queen Margaret, the Duchess of York, Lady Anne and Elizabeth herself, this instance of grief has a summational function and it sparks off the climactic scene of cursing and chanting before the final battle. At first, the mourning mother apostrophizes the dead children and then questions God’s justice as she pours forth her anguish:

Ah, my poor princes! Ah, my tender babes!
My unblown flowers, new-appearing sweets!
If yet your gentle souls fly in the air,
And not be fixed in doom perpetual,
Hover about me with your airy wings
And hear your mother’s lamentation. (4.4.9-14)

Wilt thou, o God, fly from such gentle lambs
And throw them in the entrails of the wolf?
When didst thou sleep, when such a deed was done? (4.4.22-24)

When Richard confronts her in the same scene, Elizabeth unleashes a battery of accusations against him which evidences her agony and desperation:

Cousins indeed, and by their uncle cozened
Of comfort, kingdom, kindred, freedom, life.
Whose hand soever lanced their tender hearts,
Thy head all indirectly gave direction.
No doubt the murd’rous knife was dull and blunt
Till it was whetted on thy stone-hard heart
To revel in the entrails of my lambs. (4.4.221. [2-8])

She tends to become physically violent in the course of her tirade:

But that still use of grief makes wild grief tame,
My tongue should to thy ears not name my boys
Till that my nails were anchored in thine eyes-

And I in such a desp'rate bay of death,
Like a poor barque of sails and tackling reft,
Rush all to pieces on thy rocky bottom. (4.4.221. [9-14]; emphases added)

Later, in a less aggressive fashion, she again reminds Richard of his perjury and other sins:

If thou hast feared to break an oath by him [Edward IV],
Th'imperial metal circling now thy head
Had graced the tender temples of my child,
And both the princes had been breathing here,
Which now – two tender bedfellows for dust -
Thy broken faith hath made the prey for worms. (4.4.12-17)

The overt histrionics of Elizabeth's mourning may be traced to the fact that it is necessarily fashioned and mediated by the idiom of theatre. In real life one hardly laments in impromptu iambic pentameters. Besides, Elizabeth herself advertises her mourning as a *performance*, as theatre in miniature, when she beckons the departed spirits of her babes to witness it (4.4.14). However, her mourning has links to the theatrics inherent in actual mourning rituals. The lamentations of the bereaved women seem to encode a deeper cultural tension (operating beyond the mere textual apparatus of the play) since they hark back to the real-life convention of "wailing the dead" that was increasingly suspect in post-Reformation England. The provenance of this mourning scene (4.4) has been traced not only to the *Quem queritis* trope (with the three lamenting Mary-s), the Corpus christi cycles, Seneca's *Troades*, but also to local funerary customs that were deprecated by reformers.⁶

Ariès's remark on the psychological utility of funeral customs may prove illuminating here:

The ritualization of death is a special aspect of the total strategy of man against nature, a strategy of prohibitions and concessions. This is why death has not been allowed its natural extravagance but has been imprisoned in ceremony, transformed into spectacle. This is why it could not be a solitary adventure but had to be a public phenomenon involving the whole community. (1983: 604)

With the abolition of the millennium-old doctrine of Purgatory, along with extreme unction, satisfactory masses and intercessory prayers for the dead, the communion with the afterlife was annulled in a drastic fashion, resulting in a lot of spiritual anxiety and emotional uncertainty among the English (Neill, 1997: 244-46). The wailing women of

⁶ Anthony Stafford represents the Protestant stand against the practice of noisy public mourning (marked as superstitious, effeminate and effeminizing, "heathenish" and "popish") when he remarks derisively in his *Meditations and Resolutions* (1612): "It is a wonder to see the childish whining we now-adayes use at the funerals of our friends. If we could houl them back again, our Lamentations were to some purpose; but as they are, they are vaine and in vain" (quoted in Goodland, 2005: 139).

Richard III, themselves historically belonging to the pre-Reformation era, enshrine the folkloric, age-old rituals of mourning that were frowned upon by the official religion but guaranteed emotional sustenance to certain communities or individuals.

The cultural tension over the changing funerary and eschatological discourses could not be fully articulated on Shakespeare's stage because of the contingencies of religious censorship, but the subterranean angst is tacitly dramatized through some gestures that could have sent strong signals to certain members of the audience. For example, as already observed, Elizabeth directly addresses the souls of her murdered boys and calls upon them to hear her lamentation (4.4.11-14). It in fact recalls the "open invocations for the dead" that characterized an actual funeral in Lancaster as recorded by some indignant reformers in 1590 (quoted in Goodland, 2005: 135). Similarly, Constance in *King John* has already imagined an afterlife for her boy Arthur (then alive but imprisoned by John) out of sheer maternal anxiety, but she is apprehensive about meeting him in heaven:

we shall see and know our friends in heaven.
If that be true, I shall see my boy again;
For since the birth of Cain, the first male child,
To him that did but yesterday suspire,
There was not such a gracious creature born.
*But now will canker-sorrow eat my bud
And chase the native beauty from his cheek;
And he will look as hollow as a ghost,
As dim and meagre as an ague's fit,
And so he'll die; and, rising so again,
When I shall meet him in the court of heaven,
I shall not know him: therefore never, never
Must I behold my pretty Arthur more.* (3.4.77-89; emphases added)

It is out of strong emotional attachment that bereft mothers like Elizabeth and Constance contemplate connecting with their dead children. The reformed religion, what with the eradication of Purgatory, ruled out such connectivity between the living and the dead and at the same time blocked a major channel of emotional relief. By tapping the by-then scandalous practices of mourning, the play gestures towards primal, instinctual spheres of affect that lie beyond doctrinaire constraints. The widowed queens embody the ravages of internecine political rivalry and evoke the tropes of *ubi sunt* or the Wheel of Fortune so beloved of medieval homilists. But they also deal in emotions that are not limited to their stations or individual fates, and are capable of broader currency.

More surprising is the outburst of Tyrrel, Richard's faithful underling, as he soliloquizes on his killing of the princes in the Tower, even when we recall that Shakespeare often individuates fringe characters by showing incompatible ethical/emotional drives within them. This is how we get to know that Richard's plan of exterminating the boys has been accomplished. The passage merits quotation in full:

*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 two children in their deaths' sad story.
 'O thus', quoth Dighton, 'lay the gentle babes';
 'Thus, thus', quoth Forrest, 'girdling one another
 Within their alabaster innocent arms.
 Their lips were four red roses on a stalk,
 And in their summer beauty kissed each other.'
 A book of prayers on their pillow lay,
 'Which once', quoth Forrest, 'almost changed my mind.
 But O, the devil' – there the villain stopped,
 When Dighton thus told on, 'We smotherèd
 The most replenishèd sweet work of nature,
 That from the prime creation e'er she framed.'
 Hence both are gone [overcome], with conscience and remorse.
 They could not speak, and so I left them both,
 To bear this tidings to the bloody king. (4.3.1-22, emphases added)*

A look at the corresponding passage in Edward Hall's *The Union of the Two Noble ... Families of Lancastre and Yorke* (1548), the chief source for the play, is enough to show the deviations which are designed to reinforce the child-centric affect:

James Tirrel devised that they shoulde be murthered in their beddes, and no bloude shed: to the execution whereof, he appointed Myles Forrest one of the foure that before kept them, a felowe fleshe bred in murther before tyme: and to hym he joyned one John Dighton his awne horsekeeper, a bygge broade square and strong knave. Then al the other being removed from them, this Myles Forest and John Dighton aboute mydnight, the sely children liying in their beddes, came into the chaumbre and sodenlly lapped them up amongst the clothes and so bewrapped them and entangled them, kepyng down by force the featherbed and pillows hard unto their mouthes, that within a whyle they smored & styfled them, and their breathes failing, they gave up to god their innocent soules into the joyes of heaven, leaving to the tormentours their bodies dead in the bed, which after the wretches perceived, firste by the struggling, with the panges of death, and after long liyng styl to be thoroughly dead, that layd the bodies out upon the bed, and fetched James Tirrell to see them, which when he sawe them perfightly dead, he caused the murtherers to burye them at the stayre foote, metely deepe in the grounde under a great heape of stones. (Bullough 1960: 279)

The Shakespearean play totally omits the *modus operandi* of the murderers which is described in a cool, matter-of-fact and meticulous way in the source. Moreover, the play fabricates the reaction of the murderers that is more emotionally charged. It tries to emphasize the monstrosity of the twin murders by showing that the professional assassins

involved in them were themselves deeply distressed by the heinous act. Tyrrel, who is commissioned by Richard for the twin murders, himself describes the act as “The most arch deed of piteous massacre” (4.3.2), and he further incorporates the first person reports of Dighton and Forrest to confirm and illustrate his own relation of the deed. The first person accounts set within Tyrrel’s description of the event are not designed to make the atrocity any less immediate or reliable, but they signal that the pity and remorse were shared by more than one culprit, and that the killing of the boys is liable to be universally recognized as an inhuman crime. This is another decisive interpolation, for neither in Hall’s account nor in *The True Tragedy of Richard III* (1594; a source) do we find seasoned murderers afflicted by pangs of conscience after killing the princes in the Tower. What is more, the account tries to heap on the monstrosity of the crime by emphasizing the worth and innocence of the boys. The poetic repertoire of courtly love is raided upon to delineate the beauty of the dead children – their arms are white like alabaster, “Their lips were four red roses on a stalk” (4.3.12). Further still, the children are observed to be “The most replenishèd sweet work of nature, / That from the prime creation e’er she framed”(4.3.18-19). As in the case of literary mourning of children that has been already glanced at, high-flown rhetoric on the early modern stage is not always a marker of hypocrisy, but can often be a vehicle of feelings meant to be intense and sincere.

8. Mourning and Idolatry

The assassins’ description of the beauteous babes recalls the amatory device of *blazon*—whose excessive use in the Petrarchan tradition Shakespeare himself travestied in Sonnet 130 (“My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun”). The description is thus intriguingly redolent of eroticism, by association objectifying the dead children as desirable like the Petrarchan lady love and marking them as sexually stimulating. *Eros* and *thanatos* have a comparable function in the human imaginary which makes them liable to be conflated with each other. According to Ariès (1983: 604), sex as well as death represents no clear break in the continuity between nature and culture and thus undermines the defense mechanism of human civilization against the onslaught of nature. The juxtaposition of the two may make for a heady mixture, as in baroque art:

In baroque theater there was also a tendency to intensify love by placing it as near as possible to death, but the rapprochement never went so far as to cross the forbidden threshold. A last-minute morality brought the action back either toward the fantastic or toward the idea of vanity [the *vanitas* motif] and the *memento mori*. Nevertheless, the reader and the spectator must have been profoundly aroused in spite of themselves, on an unconscious level; this can be felt in a vertiginous quality that we sense today in baroque art and literature. (Ariès, 1983: 377)

The early modern English play which articulately recognizes the threshold of necrophilia and comes dangerously close to crossing it is of course *The Second Maiden’s Tragedy* (c. 1610-11) by Thomas Middleton. In Tyrrel’s account the gesture towards the forbidden

fascination is unconscious and tangential at best. But in its emphasis on the image of the perishable human body, it also evokes the fraught post-Reformation debate on idolatry and the configuration of the human dead:

To the Protestant reformers, Catholic insistence on bodily images in their rituals of worship perversely glorified post-lapsarian corruption by tacitly affirming the ascendancy of the material over the spiritual. It was, in fact, the conceptual connections between Catholic hypostatization of the body and the dissolution of Christian identity that made sense of Protestant opposition to such seemingly disparate phenomena as cosmeticised women, relics and painted statues. [...] Protestants believed that similar ontological confusions, although in different registers, inevitably accompanied the Catholic practices of revering relics and statues, both of which also functioned as idols. In worshipping these artifacts, the faithful not only confused material signifiers with immaterial entities, they also embraced the concept of falsely autonomous, or wholly debased, material bodies. (Zimmerman, 2005: 27)

If idolatry (i.e. the misguided construction and establishment of perceptible concrete objects, especially anthropomorphic ones, as false gods) is tantamount to concupiscence (i.e. overindulgence in perception for bodily pleasure), it is quite plausible to state that the ultimate and extreme object of idolatry is the corpse—the most unnerving signifier of perishable materiality. In fact, the gnomic, homiletic trope of *vanitas* could be easily deployed by Protestant activists in their assault against idolatry. The Tyrant in *The Second Maiden's Tragedy* literalizes the metaphoric interconnections between idolatry, concupiscence and necrophilia when he kisses the disinterred corpse of the Lady and plans to have sex with it (Zimmerman 2005: 96-116). Tyrrel's account of the children tacitly feminizes (and sexualizes) them by the use of Petrarchan clichés, but it does not represent an obvious necrophilic fixation akin to the Tyrant's since it deals with the unspoilt beauty of the children before their murder. There is no description of the children's corpses. Tyrrel's speech breaks off after the relation of the assassins' sorry, speechless state.

What Tyrrel tries to do is to commemorate the children by (idolatrously) dwelling upon their beauteous bodily forms (that have been already spoilt). Elizabeth, on the other hand, addresses the *spirits* of her departed babes. However, on a different count, Tyrrel's description is akin to the Protestant side of the question since the post-Reformation funeral practices gravitated towards private and secular commemoration. Tyrrel weeps privately recalling the physical attributes of the then-alive children, whereas Elizabeth mourns publicly and (Catholic-wise) tries to communicate with the dead. In one sense, the act of recalling/describing the children is comparable to idolatry, because children are culturally fashioned (like idols) to be passive and convenient receptacles of adult signification. The fact that the children in question are already dead clinches their status as *objects* of discourse.

Commenting on the account of the sleeping children (4.3.9-13), Belsey states: "The element of formality in this description detaches it slightly from reality, but at the same time monumentalizes the image of the children, whose "alabaster" arms evoke both their whiteness and the [funerary] effigy that is their due [and that they do not receive for

their corpses are surreptitiously disposed of]” (2007:35). Differently phrased, the *marmorealization* of the boys participates in their memorialization. The lamentations for dead children and the reminiscences of them suggest *within the compass of the early modern stage* that children are not insignificant and that the adults are deeply attached to them. However, the lamentations are often exercises involving conventional rhetoric and standard tropes, and for a modern reader, these features often occlude the sincerity of purpose. A modern reader may locate a more touching and worthwhile memorialization of the dead children in the interstices of the adult discourses where the children themselves are allowed some limited agency. The “precocious” utterances of the princes, rather than their mother’s lamentation full of rhetorical commonplaces, serve to individualize them and make them *memorable*. Thus the precocity, or the individuating utterance, of the dead children (however mediated or stylized) in the Shakespeare canon, forms their ultimate epitaph. To end with, one may glance at such a commemoration from a real-life situation. Adam Martindale, English yeoman, writes in his diary fondly about his son John who died in 1663:

He was a beautifull child, and very manly and courageous for his age ... We had a wanton tearing calfe, that would runne at children to beare them over. This calfe he would encounter with a sticke in his hand, when he was about two yeares old ... stand his ground stoutly, beat it backe, and triumph over it, crying *caw, caw*, meaning he had beaten the calfe. I doe not think one child of 100 of his age durst doe so much. (Quoted in Cunningham 2005: 52)

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