

## ‘This little abstract’: Inscribing History upon the Child in Shakespeare’s *King John*

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But this from rumour’s tongue  
I idly heard; if true or false I know not.  
(*King John*, 4.2.123-124)<sup>1</sup>

The text of a history play offers a literary version of historical events, which is designed to be spoken on stage and heard by an audience expected to suspend their disbelief and imagine they are witnessing new events unfolding before their eyes.<sup>2</sup> This process can be complex and problematic because, in reality, audiences are aware that the events depicted on stage are unalterable and, even at the beginning of a new performance, are already consigned to the past. Yet *King John*, more than other Shakespearean histories, evokes a sense of uncertainty, of history in the making, and of characters battling either to enforce or to escape their allotted place in the historical narrative. As Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin have commented: ‘No actions are conclusive, neither the wills of fathers, nor the marriages of children, nor the French king’s repeated efforts at history-making’ (2004, p.183). What results is a play that engages with conflicting definitions of history, with the demands of what

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from *King John* are taken from Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson and David Scott Kastan (eds.), 1998. *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*, 3<sup>rd</sup> series, Walton-on-Thames: Thomas Nelson and Sons.

<sup>2</sup> This article is based on extracts from a chapter of my forthcoming PhD thesis, which explores the performance history of child characters in *Richard III*, *King John* and *Macbeth*.

might be termed national or political history set in opposition with personal identity and memory. This is a conflict which takes place within, as well as between, characters, as individuals find their private identities and desires at odds with the public and dynastic roles they are expected to play. This antagonism between national and personal histories finds expression in a parallel opposition between the literary and the spoken: characters wishing to uphold the demands of dynastic obligation and public role use language steeped in imagery of printing and inscription, while those wishing to escape such demands assert an alternative, personal narrative. This alternative narrative is reliant upon word of mouth; it is a transient and unrecorded spoken history recounting personal and individual experiences which competes with the larger national history for the audience's attention. The messenger's caveat, quoted above, that he has his news 'from rumour's tongue' suggests the unreliability of the oral, the impossibility of ascertaining if the spoken is true or false. In fact, in *King John*, the opposite is revealed to be true as the spoken becomes synonymous with personal integrity and the concerns of the individual while the printed word, more usually associated with permanence, signals instead an adherence to hierarchical and patriarchal roles, which are often superficial and quickly changed for political gain.

Nowhere is this conflict between private identity and dynastic obligation more visible than in the character of Prince Arthur, an easily manipulated child, who finds his personal identity and history constantly disregarded and subordinated to his public, dynastic role as nephew of Richard Coeur-de-Lion and contender for the English throne. Lauded by his mother Constance and her French allies as the rightful, but usurped, heir to the crown, he is demonised by his

uncle John, who is in possession of the title. Arthur's public role is powerful, but as an individual he is defined by his silence, docility and meekness, and it is the gulf between his public importance and his private weakness that drives the play as adult characters manipulate and influence him to serve their own ends. The emphasis on the child's place in the Plantagenet dynasty, his role within the political history of the nation, is such that his youth is overlooked or ignored by the adult characters. When John and his forces arrive to challenge Arthur's claim, the French King, Philip, describes Arthur in such a way as to obliterate his individuality and make him synonymous with his dynastic role:

Look here upon thy brother Geoffrey's face.  
 These eyes, these brows, were moulded out of his;  
 This little abstract doth contain that large  
 Which died in Geoffrey, and the hand of time  
 Shall draw this brief into as huge a volume.

(2.1.99-103)

Philip traces Geoffrey's past in Arthur's face and suggests that the child's future is to become a copy of his father; his purpose is to be an identical link in the chain of the Plantagenet dynasty. Philip's description allows him no individual identity: his history and his future are mapped out in his face and he cannot escape his role as Geoffrey's son. Significantly, Philip's use of textual and printing imagery locates Arthur's place specifically in chronicle history, figuring him as a historical text in the process of being written, the 'abstract' that will eventually become a 'volume'. Arthur's identity, his entire existence, is totally dependent upon his patrilineage: he is fated to grow from a 'little abstract' of his father, into a full sized tome. King Philip's confidence in Arthur's potential is rich with dramatic irony, for the audience, familiar with the history, will be

aware that Arthur's premature death will prevent him from fulfilling this destiny: Arthur will remain only a 'little abstract'.

Twice in this scene Arthur is described as 'oppressed': first by his mother Constance ('this oppressed boy' (l.177)), then by King Philip ('this oppressed child' (l.245)). In both instances his allies speak the word, implying that he is 'oppressed' by John, who denies him what they consider to be his birthright. But considering Arthur's silence, his powerlessness, and above all the lack of any individuality demonstrated by him in the early acts, the implication is that Arthur is dominated just as much by his mother and his allies as by his enemies. Neither side will allow him an identity that is not based upon dynasty, and neither seems to recognise him as an individual, let alone as a vulnerable child. Moreover the choice of the word 'oppressed' is striking since it connotes 'pressed'.<sup>3</sup> In Philip and Constance's insistence that Arthur is 'oppressed' lies an image of the child literally being pressed or imprinted with his political role. The idea of Arthur as 'pressed' suggests an image of the boy as a blank sheet of paper or perhaps a piece of unformed wax, ready and waiting to receive an impression; he is to be stamped with the image of his paternal forbears and to be inscribed upon by those who figure him as a vehicle for the writing of histories. France's image of Arthur growing naturally in time from 'little abstract' to 'full volume' is supplanted by the suggestion of a more sinister picture, in which Arthur is forcibly and suddenly imprinted with his patriarchal destiny.

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<sup>3</sup>The *Oxford English Dictionary Online* gives the following definition: 'oppress, *v.* To press forcefully on (a person or thing), esp. so as to cause damage or discomfort; to crush; to crowd; to smother. *Obs.*' This supports the connection between the words 'oppressed', and 'pressed'. A connection might even be made with the printing press, which, though not relevant to *King John's* medieval setting, would be available to its Early Modern audiences.

Arthur is not the only child to function in this way. Blanche, John's niece, and Lewis, the French King's son, are manipulated by the older generation into a marriage that will reconcile and bring together the warring French and English, and while Lewis is clearly a willing player in this political union, Blanche's position is more reluctant. Her first response to the suggested match is coldly dutiful; she is well aware that it is her political and familial duty to marry at the request of her uncle: 'My uncle's will in this respect is mine' (2.1.510). However, when explicitly asked for her formal consent she leaves the audience in no doubt that she is all too aware of the distinction between personal choice and political duty:

JOHN: What say these young ones? What say you my  
niece?

BLANCHE: That she is bound in honour still to do  
What you in wisdom still vouchsafe to say.  
(2.1.521-523)

By referring to herself in the third person as 'she', Blanche makes it clear that in her political and dynastic role as John's niece she is bound to agree to the marriage, but by refusing to use the pronoun 'I', she not only withholds her *personal* consent and therefore communicates effectively that the marriage is against her will, but also protects herself from the hypocrisy that Lewis has demonstrated and maintains her personal integrity. She divides herself figuratively into private and public personas: the private 'I', who refuses to play the role of Lewis's blushing bride – 'I will not flatter you, my Lord, / That all I see in you is worthy love' (ll.516-517) – and the public 'she', who is 'bound in honour' to obey her uncle and further his political goals.

In many ways Blanche is ‘as much as Arthur a political pawn’ (Mattchett, 1962, p.238): she can no more escape the demands of politics and lineage than he. But her maturity has an advantage over his youth. Arthur’s only protests are childish tears and self-effacing despair: when his mother and grandmother quarrel over his right to the throne, he protests ‘I would that I were low laid in my grave’ (2.1.164). Blanche, however, is able to understand the distinction between public and private that governs the lives of both characters. This comprehension allows her to articulate a form of protest in her use of the word ‘she’ which, although it cannot extricate her from her political duty, at least alerts the audience to her divided identity. Phyllis Rackin suggests that, ‘Perhaps taking his cue from the name of the historical character, Shakespeare depicts Blanch [sic] as a blank page awaiting the inscription of a masculine text [...] to all three men, she is a site for the inscription of a historical narrative of military truce and genealogical succession’ (Rackin, 1989, p.83). This is also a perfect description of Arthur’s position. However, I would perhaps substitute the word ‘masculine’ with ‘patriarchal’, for it is not only the women, but also sons such as Arthur who find themselves sites for the inscription of ‘historical narrative[s]’ of ‘genealogical succession’, in *King John*.

When Arthur is captured and imprisoned by his uncle’s forces in Act 3, Constance grieves for her lost son in a speech which has come to epitomise parental loss to such an extent that critics have speculated that Shakespeare wrote it after the death of his own son, Hamnet. Yet the speech is open to such interpretation precisely because of its generality: it could be applied to the loss of any child and the grief of any parent. It says nothing about Arthur that

differentiates or individuates him from the standard trope of the innocent child:

Grief fills the room up of my absent child,  
Lies on 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;  
Then have I reason to be fond of grief?

(3.3.93-98)

The speech is easy to identify with because it presents a very general image of an idolised child: Constance remembers and laments Arthur's 'pretty looks', 'words', and 'gracious parts' without ever specifying what these are. They are applicable to all children and specific to none. It is also in the choice of the word 'absent' that the poignancy of this speech lies. 'Absent' is not so specific as to mean 'dead' or even 'lost'. It carries with it a sense of *lack*<sup>4</sup> that somehow implies that the child has never been present, and it brings home to an audience the idea, which has been implicit in all Arthur's previous appearances, that he has always been an absence – a blank page upon which the hopes, fears and ideals of the other characters have been inscribed.

Constance's vivid image of grief 'stuff[ing] out' Arthur's 'vacant garments' is particularly pertinent, for it consolidates this idea of absence: Arthur is merely a set of 'vacant garments', which the other characters 'stuff out' with whatever 'form' suits their purpose, the word 'form' once again suggesting something printed or

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<sup>4</sup> *The New Collins Concise English Dictionary*, 1982, gives the second definition of 'absent' as 'lacking'.

inscribed<sup>5</sup>. To John Arthur is a ‘serpent’ (3.2.71); to Constance he is the perfect conjunction of physical beauty and fortunate birth. To Cardinal Pandulph, who closes the scene, he is the means by which Rome can seek revenge on John. For, guessing correctly that John cannot feel secure ‘whiles warm life plays in that infant’s veins’ (3.3.132), Pandulph plots with Lewis that Arthur’s death will not only open the way for the Dauphin to claim the English throne ‘in the right of Lady Blanche [his] wife’ (3.3.142), but provide the perfect motivation for the English people to turn away from John and welcome Lewis as avenger of the child’s death. Act 3 ends with the fate of England seemingly inseparable from the fate of Arthur. The child has been so totally subsumed by his political role that he now seems synonymous with the nation, and the course of the national history is dependent on his personal fate.

It is at the beginning of the fourth act of *King John*, which finds Arthur imprisoned with his gaoler Hubert, that some critics have suggested that the play begins to break down. Juliet Dusinberre has said that in the scene between Arthur and Hubert (4.1.), ‘a kind of death-wish begins to pervade the play’ (1989, pp.51-52). While it is true to say that this scene signals a turning point in the play’s plot, tone and pace, it is not the death-wish that Dusinberre describes. If the play disintegrates at this point it is not, I think, the result of ‘slipshod craftsmanship’ (Braunmuller, 1989, p.46), but of a deliberate attempt to portray the breakdown of public façades and masquerades and the renewed assertion of private wills and identities. It is in fact the forces that have thus far held personal identity in thrall to public role that disintegrate from this point on. The discourse between Arthur and Hubert in 4.1 transforms the play and

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<sup>5</sup> ‘forme or U.S. form *n.* *Printing.* type matter, blocks etc., assembled in a chase and ready for printing’ as defined in *The New Collins Concise English Dictionary*, 1982.



sets in motion a divergence between the private and the public, between official national history and personal narratives, and between writing and speech.

Act 4 begins ominously for Arthur. We are aware that he is imprisoned and before he enters the audience is further made aware that he is in danger through Hubert's order to an unspecified number of 'executioners' to 'heat [...] these irons hot', and on his command 'rush forth/ And bind the boy [...] /Fast to the chair.' (4.1.1-5). Yet when Arthur enters he seems less subdued and indeed less oppressed than we have ever seen him. He greets his prison guard fondly, by his Christian name – 'good morrow Hubert' (1.9) – and the manner of his address is in stark contrast to the way he has previously spoken to his mother. Indeed, Juliet Dusinberre described his earlier admonition to Constance, 'I do beseech you, madam, be content' (2.2.42), as 'so chill and so unchildlike' (1989, p.50). But if Arthur appears more 'childlike' in this scene, it is perhaps as much to do with how Hubert addresses him as how he himself speaks. The private location of the scene seems to engender a relaxation of the rigid adherence to public role, and consequently Hubert's treatment of Arthur, although tainted for the audience by the knowledge of the impending blinding, is more humane, and indeed more human, than anything we have yet seen in *King John*. While the child's own mother and grandmother addressed him impersonally as 'boy', Hubert calls Arthur forth as 'Young lad' (1.8), and responds to his greeting with 'Good morrow, little prince' (1.9). If 'young lad' has a warmer tone than 'boy', 'little prince' combines respect with what sounds like genuine affection. While such generic terms of address do still, to an extent, efface Arthur's individuality, crucially they acknowledge his youth in a way

that no other character has yet done. Arthur responds to this treatment by revealing, for the first time, some glimpses of individuality, and speaks more in the first thirty lines of this scene than he has previously uttered in the whole play. Vaughan comments that ‘genealogy [...] imprisons male heirs even as it privileges them’ (1989, p.71), and it seems that Arthur’s physical imprisonment at the beginning of Act 4 has paradoxically liberated him from the pressure of his public role.

Arthur’s first lengthy speech deserves detailed analysis, not only because it elucidates his character, but also because it signals a turning point in the child’s fate and consequently in the wider play:

Mercy on me!  
 Methinks nobody should be sad but I:  
 Yet, I remember, when I was in France,  
 Young gentlemen would be as sad as night  
 Only for wantonness. By my Christendom,  
 So I were out of prison and kept sheep,  
 I should be merry as the day is long.  
 And so I would be here, but that I doubt  
 My uncle practises more harm to me.  
 He is afraid of me, and I of him.  
 Is it my fault that I was Geoffrey’s son?  
 No, indeed is’t not. And I would to God  
 I were your son, so you would love me Hubert.  
 (4.1.14-26)

Arthur’s speech, while ostensibly a straightforward lament for his situation, subtly draws together all the dominant themes of the play. His ‘I remember’ (l.16) is an assertion of a *personal* history. It counteracts the dynastic history we have seen forced upon Arthur by the other characters and gives us a glimpse of a past and a life which is independent of his glittering familial line. It gives Hubert, and the audience, a view of Arthur as an individual, with memories and experiences, which works against the image of Arthur as a ‘little

abstract' of his paternal line, an anonymous link in a patriarchal chain. Moreover, what the child remembers – 'young gentlemen' who 'would be sad as night /Only for wantonness' (ll.17-18) – reveals his insight into the kind of role-play that has dominated the politics of the play thus far. It shows his ability to distinguish between inward reality and outward façade, between his own deep-seated sadness and the fashionable melancholy adopted by the young gentlemen. Finally, Arthur articulates here that his birthright is a curse to him. He would be 'merry' if he 'kept sheep' or even if he remained in prison, so long as the threat to his life posed by his public role were removed.

The combination of Arthur's insight into his own plight, his ability to distinguish between the superficial and the true, and his recitation of a personal history, contribute to an altered view of the character. It is no longer possible to see him purely as John's dynastic rival: he has become a more realistically dramatised child. This revelation has a remarkable effect on Hubert. Hubert, who began the scene seemingly comfortable in his role as John's paid murderer, secure in the knowledge that his actions were justified by the King's written warrant, becomes, after Arthur's speech, a divided character. From this point on he speaks in two voices: the voice of the immovable, merciless executioner, which he uses when speaking to Arthur, and what we come to believe is his own true voice – the voice of a man struggling with natural mercy towards the child – which is used only in asides to the audience (as they are usually presented in modern editions of the play):

[*aside*] If I talk to him, with his innocent prate  
 He will awake my mercy which lies dead:  
 Therefore I will be sudden and dispatch.       (4.1.23-25)

It is as if Arthur's candour, his sudden revelation of his true self and his rejection of his public role, makes it impossible for Hubert to maintain his own façade: the role of grim, unflinching executioner. When Arthur expresses concern for him, 'Are you sick Hubert? you look pale to-day' (4.1.26), Hubert again finds his resolution shaken, responding in an aside, 'His words do take possession of my bosom' (1.30). The emphasis on the power of speech – Arthur's 'prate' – is clear, and Hubert's reluctance to hear the child's pleas implies that speech between two individuals is more persuasive and holds more sway than written instruction from a king to a subject. Arthur refuses to conform to his role as contender for the throne and, declining to make any appeal to Hubert as a prince to a subject, he does not conform to the expected role of prisoner either. Arthur does not hate or fear Hubert, but professes love for him. Because of this, his words circumvent Hubert's own façade and speak directly to his heart. Refusing to play the conventional role of prisoner or victim, Arthur transforms his relationship with Hubert from that of gaoler and prisoner, to that of vulnerable child and caring adult. When one character steps out of his expected role, the other cannot easily proceed with his and the play, or at least the role-play within it, breaks down.

Having been shown the warrant for his blinding, Arthur once again invokes a personal, spoken history to dissuade Hubert from his task:

Have you the heart? When your head did but ache,  
 I knit my handkerchief about your brows.  
 The best I had, a princess wrought it me,  
 And I did never ask it you again.  
 And with my hand at midnight held your head,  
 And, like the watchful minutes to the hour,

Still and anon cheer'd up the heavy time,  
 Saying, 'What lack you?' and 'Where lies your grief?'  
 Or 'What good love may I perform for you?'  
 Many a poor man's son would have lien still  
 And ne'er have spoke a loving word to you;  
 But you at your sick-service had a prince

(4.1.41-52)

This builds on the idea of Arthur as a child with an individual past, but it also goes further than the previous speech. For the history Arthur recalls here is not his alone; it is a history shared with Hubert, which complicates Hubert's duty by figuring him not as a merciless executioner, but as a fragile ailing man, tended by a small boy. Arthur does not just invoke his own innocence and decency to save himself. At this point he also invokes Hubert's humanity, reminding him of a time when he related to Arthur not as guard to prisoner, but as human to human, stripping away both of their external roles. As A.J. Piesse states, '[Arthur] saves himself from blinding and death by invoking personal history reminding Hubert of the strength of their relationship and of past kindnesses' (2002, p.136).

Every time Hubert reiterates his intent to blind Arthur in 4.1, the child's response is not to plead his innocence, but to repeatedly question Hubert's will, determination and indeed ability to perform the task. At lines 37-39, when first confronted with the warrant he asks, 'Must you with hot irons burn out both mine eyes? [...] And will you?' At line 41 he demands, 'Have you the heart?' and again at line 56, 'Will you put out mine eyes?' That Arthur so consistently asks Hubert *if* he can bring himself to put out his eyes rather than directly pleading with him not to suggests that Arthur has some insight into Hubert's 'true' character, that Hubert is playing a role through which Arthur can see. This is made explicit at line 68,

where Arthur flatly states his disbelief that Hubert's heart is truly in his task:

And if an angel should have come to me  
 And told me Hubert should put out mine eyes,  
 I would not have believ'd him, – no tongue  
 But Hubert's.

(4.1.68-71)

Interestingly, this short speech combines both disbelief that Hubert could perpetrate such violence and a paradoxically touching continued faith in Hubert's sincerity. Arthur seems simultaneously to believe that Hubert is both too good to blind him, yet also too good to lie about his intentions: if Hubert tells Arthur he must blind him, then Arthur must accept it because he trusts in Hubert's innate sincerity and truthfulness. Indeed, Arthur thinks him trustworthier than an angel. It also highlights Arthur's tendency to believe the sincerity of the oral over the written: he has to hear the news from Hubert's tongue because the written warrant is not enough to convince him. Moreover, Arthur puts credence only in the spoken word at first-hand and not in secondary accounts. An angel reporting Hubert's intentions would not be so credible: it would be information 'from rumour's tongue [...] idly heard' (4.2.123-124). For Arthur, only Hubert himself can transform his inner thoughts into truthful speech, a detail that again associates the oral with innate sincerity. It is at this point that Hubert calls forth his fellow executioners to bind Arthur, as if he fears that the child's faith in him is indeed in danger of stripping him of his designated role and revealing his inherent pity and sympathy.

The entrance of the executioners marks the point in the scene at which the focus on the divergence between appearance and inner

truth becomes explicit. Arthur's initial response to the executioners is based exclusively on appearance. Seeing them enter bearing the instruments of blinding, he exclaims:

O, save me, Hubert, save me! my eyes are out  
 Even with the fierce looks of these bloody men  
 [...]
 Nay, hear me Hubert, drive these men away,  
 And I will sit as quiet as a lamb;  
 I will not stir, nor winch, nor speak a word,  
 Nor look upon the iron angerly;  
 Thrust but these men away, and I'll forgive you  
 Whatever torment you do put me to.

(4.1.72-83)

Arthur's exclamation, 'my eyes are out /Even with the looks of these bloody men' (ll.72-73), is poignantly ironic, for it is immediately revealed that while of course the sight of the executioners has not literally blinded him, it has clouded his insight, blinding him, figuratively speaking, to what lies beneath the 'fierce' appearance of the men. On being dismissed, the first executioner expresses relief, 'I am best pleas'd to be away from such a deed' (l.85), and Arthur understands that his judgement of the men, based on their appearance alone, has been premature and misguided: 'Alas, I then have chid away my friend! /He hath a stern look, but a gentle heart.' (4.1.86-87).

However, even this mistake proves beneficial to Arthur, for the overt realisation that stern looks may hide gentle hearts leads him to his final and ultimately successful argument: that the very instruments Hubert is to use to put out his eyes, the fire and the iron, will refuse to play their designated role. The iron is cold 'and would not harm [him]', the 'fire is dead with grief', and 'All things that [Hubert] should use to do [Arthur] wrong /Deny their

office' (4.1.103-118). The reluctance of the first executioner to perform his designated task alerts Arthur to the possibility of a fracture between personal will and public role, and he uses this to effect a similar fracture within Hubert, who finally admits that he cannot fulfil the role in which John has cast him and accepts that Arthur's oral pleas have outweighed and overpowered John's written warrant:

Well, see to live; I will not touch thine eye  
 For all the treasure that thine uncle owes:  
 Yet I am sworn and I did purpose, boy,  
 With this same very iron to burn them out.  
(4.1.121-124)

Hubert's capitulation signals the triumph of the oral over the written in this scene. It is significant that the plot to kill Arthur began, in fact, with an *oral* pact between John and Hubert in 3.2, in which the murder of the child was presented as almost literally unspeakable. They came to an understanding of what must take place through a tense and brief exchange in which neither character seemed prepared to articulate the act explicitly or in detail:

JOHN: Death.  
 HUBERT: My Lord?  
 JOHN: A grave.  
 HUBERT: He shall not live.  
 JOHN: Enough.  
(3.2.76)

However, the clear discomfort and unease that Hubert exhibits in this passage seems to have evaporated by the outset of 4.1, by which time a written warrant for the deed has been procured. Hubert's faith in John's written warrant to absolve him from guilt seems complete: when the First Executioner queried its power – 'I hope your warrant



will bear out the deed' (4.1.6) – Hubert dismissed the concern contemptuously: 'Uncleanly scruples! fear not you' (4.1.7). His unquestioning confidence in the written license for the murder is similar in nature to that of Pedrigano in Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, who goes laughing and jesting to his execution, firmly, and mistakenly, believing his master Lorenzo has provided a written pardon for his crime. Yet, unlike the unfortunate Pedrigano, by the end of 4.1 the power of Arthur's speech has completely demolished Hubert's faith in the warrant and with it his desire for monetary gain. The written warrant becomes associated with material reward for disregarding or bypassing conscience and moral qualms, while the oral appeals directly to such qualms, rendering material goods worthless in comparison to a clear conscience.

Arthur's response to his reprieve – 'O, now you look like Hubert! all this while /You were disguised' (ll.125-126) – is in keeping with the tone of the scene. Arthur does not receive Hubert's change of heart as a miracle but as a natural return to his true self with the removal of an obscuring disguise, not the donning of an unaccustomed mercy. For Arthur the aberration in Hubert's character is not that the grim executioner cannot bring himself to carry out the blinding, but that the man he firmly believed to be good and decent ever consented to the blinding in the first place. As A.J. Piesse says, Arthur 'explicitly announces that he has reconciled the Hubert who was acting out orders out of character to the personally true historical version of the self' (2002, p.137).

This scene not only allows us to see Arthur free from the oppression of his dynastic role and able to reveal his personal history and individuality, but it also demonstrates his ability to see through the political role-play of other characters and, albeit only briefly, to

liberate himself and Hubert from the constraints of their public duties. Piesse notes,

In the perceptions of Arthur, a momentarily possible saviour of the kingdom, there is a temporary rapprochement between personal history and the broader notion of seeming and proper integrity. There is a momentary glimpse that the problematic elements of the play as a whole might potentially have been resolved in this figure (2002, p.137).

But this glimpse can only be tantalisingly momentary. While within this scene Arthur does indeed effect a ‘rapprochement’ between the public and the private, in the wider play public role-playing and emphasis on external appearance still hold sway. Arthur’s persuasion of Hubert in fact marks the complete divergence and dislocation of public from private, and personal history from national history. Hubert closes the scene knowing that he must conceal his private mercy and publicise a false history to the nation in which Arthur has indeed been murdered:

Your uncle must not know but you are dead.  
I’ll fill these dogged spies with false reports:  
And, pretty child, sleep doubtless and secure  
That Hubert, for the wealth of all the world,  
Will not offend thee.

(4.1.127-131)

Until this point in the play, reluctant individuals had been forcibly written into national history, but after 4.1 the two paths deviate completely. When, in 2.1, Blanche’s dynastic role demands that she marry the Dauphin, she has to comply. Arthur, however, ends 4.1 publicly dead but personally unharmed. Blanche’s compliance with her uncle’s wishes left her metaphorically torn apart, but Arthur’s reported death divorces him and liberates him from his oppressive

public role. He becomes at the end of 4.1 an unhistorical or even ahistorical character: the public Arthur – ‘little abstract’ of his father – is officially dead, and the private Arthur has a glimpse of a life full of endless possibility.

4.3 opens with the ill-fated Arthur on the walls of the castle, determined to escape his imprisonment:

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

*[Leaps down.]*

O me! My uncle's spirit is in these stones!  
 Heaven take my soul, and England keep my bones!

(4.3.1-10)

Although the brevity of the attempt is pathetic and the suddenness of the death shocking, Arthur's final lines are more determined and more energetic than any of his other speeches. It is significant that he never once mentions the destination of his escape; getting away in itself seems to be the end as much as the means. While it could easily be assumed that he is running from the threat of his uncle and back to his French allies, this is never explicitly stated, and it is equally, if not more, plausible that he is leaving his past life completely, shaking off the constraints of his political and dynastic role as well as his physical imprisonment, and contemplating a new private existence, free from the duty and expectation of patrilineage. Ultimately it matters little what Arthur is running from, or whether he has a plan of action. What is significant is the sense of breathless excitement and possibility contained in the first 8 lines of 4.3. The boy who

previously capitulated to the wishes of his mother, who had his whole future mapped out for him, and who was destined to become an imprint or copy of his father has, albeit briefly, the opportunity to decide his own future and to write his own history. While the very fact of Arthur's death can be read as a failure of his attempt to determine his own destiny and identity, the manner in which he faces it can be interpreted in a more positive light. The audience might realise that his leap from the walls is misjudged and that he is doomed, but there is something undeniably hopeful and admirable in the fact that he meets his death alone and that, in the end, he has nothing and no-one to contend with except his own fear, which he conquers: 'I am afraid, and yet I'll venture it' (4.3.5). In the final moments of his life, Arthur seems to come of age. He takes control of his own destiny, and, tellingly, it is at the moment when he has finally cast off the trappings of royalty and disguised himself as a ship-boy that he seems most regal and most fit to be a king. The child who spent the first half of the play a blank page inscribed with the ambitions of others, but seemingly hollow inside, ends his life, and his appearance in the play, expressing his determination to shape his own destiny. Where he began seeming to epitomise the division between public role and private self, at his death the only division he acknowledges is the ultimate division of body and soul: 'Heaven take my soul, and England keep my bones' (4.3.10). The profundity of this division of the corporeal and the spiritual serves only to make the shifting of allegiances, identities and roles of the other characters appear more hypocritical and self-serving. Arthur has found his true self and only death can effect any division or change in him.

The pace seems to quicken after Arthur's death and the end of the play approaches rapidly in a series of skirmishes and changes of

allegiance. John relinquishes his crown to the Church, and then is crowned for a third time, before being mysteriously poisoned by a monk. In the midst of all this confusion, it is difficult to discern whether any progression, either moral or political, has been made since the beginning of the play. This ingrained disorder at the end of *King John* is acknowledged within the play itself. As John lies on his deathbed, Salisbury exhorts his young son and heir Prince Henry:

Be of good comfort, prince, for you are born  
 To set a form upon that indigest  
 Which he hath left so shapeless and so rude.  
(5.7.25-270)

This is clearly meant to be encouraging and signal a return to order in the new reign, but it is not straightforward or simple. The image of ‘setting a form’ on a state of confusion echoes the printing imagery which came to be associated with Arthur earlier in the play. The imposition of a ‘form’ has become, in *King John*, synonymous with constraint and oppression, with the uncomfortable image of Arthur as a ‘little abstract’ of his father, or as a set of ‘vacant garments’ to be ‘stuffed out’ with whatever ‘form’ powerful adults want to inscribe upon him. Moreover, there is a sense that the boy, Prince Henry, may end the play as Arthur began: forced into a prescribed dynastic role. Salisbury ominously states that Henry is ‘born’ to correct the chaos of his father’s reign, suggesting that his life and history are predetermined by his public role and that he has no personal choice or individual will. This sense of unease is augmented by Henry’s own dutiful response to his father’s impending death:

I am the cygnet to this pale faint swan,  
 Who chants a doleful hymn to his own death  
 (5.7.21-22)

‘Cygnet’ connotes its homonym, ‘signet’ – a ring used to impress the royal seal onto documents – continuing the imagery of imprinting and pressing and linking young Henry’s description of himself here with France’s earlier declaration that Arthur is a ‘little abstract’ of his father Geoffrey’s ‘huge volume’. Both images suggest a patriarchal succession that replaces fathers with identical sons who subordinate any individuality or personal will to the greater demands of dynastic continuity.

In the end, *King John* seems disturbingly circular. Act 4 provides a glimpse of possibility as Hubert and Arthur shake off their prescribed public roles and attempt to assert individual will, but by the final scene of Act 5, Arthur is dead and Hubert has disappeared. Act 5 seems like a dutiful son, effacing any individual desire to deviate from dynastic succession and conforming to the pattern of the patriarch, Act 1, with both the opening and closing acts of the play depicting a situation where hope for political stability and national security rests on the shoulders of a young boy who is burdened with the expectation that he will grow into a copy of his father. Only John himself seems altered. At the opening of the play he attempted to be a writer of history: he directed events and cast his followers in roles that suited him, marrying his niece to the Dauphin and casting Hubert as a murderer. On his deathbed, however, John figures himself not as a writer of histories but as a text. He is, he says, ‘a scribbled form, drawn with a pen /Upon a parchment, and against this fire /Do I shrink up’ (5.7.31-33). Physically weakened by the poison, John is aware of his own fragile mortality. His image of

himself as an ephemeral, handwritten text, mediates between the permanence associated with the printing imagery used to oppress Arthur, and the utter transience of Arthur's own oral victory over John's written command that Hubert blind him. John's metaphor dissolves the distinction between his public and private persons. In his public role as the king, he is all-powerful: he can write people in and out of his history as he chooses, but privately he is only a man, as vulnerable and assailable as Arthur, the 'little abstract'.

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