

THE CHILD AS OTHER IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

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Abstract: Although there are not many children in Shakespeare's plays, his treatment of them is quite unique, both for his own time and today. Shakespeare's children are authentic selves who frequently possess extraordinary intellect and vision. Shakespeare's introduction of child characters as victims highlights his implicit condemnation of violence as embodied in people in power.

Keywords: child, other, representation, violence.

Introduction

There are a relatively small number of child characters in Shakespeare's plays, but there is an obvious interest in childhood—a view expressed by Morriss Henry Partee in his *Childhood in Shakespeare* (7), which I share. According to an estimate quoted by this author, “of the roughly one thousand characters that Shakespeare creates, only about thirty are children, and only thirteen of these have fairly significant roles” (40). However, although the number of child characters in Shakespeare is not large, it is still larger than in most plays by his contemporaries, who did not have a very high regard for children. The other aspect of my theme, the question of the conceptualization of otherness in Shakespeare's plays, has generally been related to race and ethnicity, above all in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* (Nyoni 1-10). Discussion of otherness has also focused on the representation of “other worlds”, that is, non-English and non-European civilizations, in Shakespeare's plays (Bartels 111-38). My argument here is that Shakespeare was aware of the evident othering of children in the eyes of callous and powerful villains who had lost innocence and compassion, and that this theme is obvious in some of his plays.

Writing about children and suffering in Shakespeare's plays, Ann Blake expresses the view that Shakespeare's children “are tender-hearted and loyal, brave, and idealistic.

Moreover, they are free from adult vices, and emphatically innocent” (Blake 293). Other critics, too, have described Shakespeare’s child characters from a sentimental perspective. Bradley, for instance, thought them to be “affectionate, frank, brave, high-spirited, of an open and free nature like Shakespeare’s best men” (332).

Some other critics, however, stress the “precocity” of Shakespeare’s children. These include Marjorie Garber (30), who sees them as “both pert and malapert, disconcertingly solemn and prematurely adult,” while “their disquieting adulthood strikes the audience with its oddness and we are relieved when these terrible infants leave the stage. We may feel it” writes Garber,” to be no accident that almost all go to their deaths”, which would appear callous if it were not ironic. In Partee’s view, such interpretations stem from a fallacy of associating Shakespeare’s alleged “awkward handling of children” with the view of the “general populace” in Elizabethan England, who regarded children as “miniature adults” and actually “lacked a complete sense of childhood,” who had “little sense of the child’s potential” and did not “appreciate the natural qualities of children” (9).

Another line of interpretation finds autobiographical elements in Shakespeare’s handling of children, hinting that “a fanciful composite of these child characters may give a sketch of Shakespeare’s son”. Thus De Chambrun observes that “Hamnet Shakespeare will always live in his father’s words, where we feel that he is recalled in each portrait of a delicate, charming and intelligent boy destined for a premature death” (198). Shakespeare does demonstrate an extensive awareness of the special nature of children, thinks Partee. The precocity and sometimes even cruelty that Shakespeare attributes to children may have stemmed from his “observation of children nurtured by a demanding society and its rigorous educational system,” and the existence of pronounced “parental and social violence” (11).

An Overview of the Representation of Children in English Literature

In order to fully grasp the aesthetic and ethical significance of Shakespeare’s special treatment of children, we need to give a brief survey of the representation of children in English literature before and after Shakespeare.

Daniel T. Kline (2), in his essay on theorizing the figure of the child in Middle English Literature, begins with a case of child kidnapping recorded in 1373 and states: “I’d like to begin this paper with an ... observation: when children are featured in Middle English literature, they are often abused in some way-regularly threatened, violated, killed, or already dead.” He then goes on to illustrate his statement with examples from the medieval poem “Pearl,” from *Canterbury Tales*, and from some lesser collections of medieval texts. Kline

believes that literary and historical accounts of violence against children highlight the fact that children were stripped of subjectivity “by powerful socio-political forces, often embodied in specific adults, parents, or parent-surrogates, who usurp the child's subjectivity for their own purposes” (2). He argues that this usurpation is in itself a form of violence that features as both physical and social, and as a textualized or discursive phenomenon. The medieval child, according to the accounts quoted by Kline, was a commodity whose desires were subordinated to the interests of his masters (3). This childish *Other*, continues Kline, has its subversive side: “to be childish, transgressive, and capricious” means to test the boundaries and the culture, by defying “accepted social and behavioral standards” (8-10). This last point can throw some light on the role of children in Shakespeare’s plays, as further analysis will demonstrate.

Representation of children as transgressive and as miniature adults has its roots in the *Bible*. As Dupeyron-Lafay points out, the *Old Testament* books of *Genesis*, *Job*, *Psalms* and *Ecclesiastes* express a view that even children are sinful, being born of woman’s “polluted flesh.” This view was further elaborated in Augustine’s *Confessions* (fourth century AD). In Part I of the book, chapter 7 is entitled “Infancy Itself is Not Sinless,” and chapter 19 “The Corruption of the Child’s Soul” (Dupeyron-Lafay 2). This view persisted up to the Renaissance and beyond and ceased to be universal only with the coming of the Enlightenment, which rejected the notion of original sin. One of its leading thinkers, Voltaire, believed that man is born good and that the system of government, including all social institutions, corrupts him. By the mid-eighteenth century the child was no longer seen as a miniature adult, but rather as “a being in its own right” (Dupeyron-Lafay 3). This theory was further developed by the Romantics, who saw children as endowed with special visionary power, and it might well be that they were partly inspired by Shakespeare. William Wordsworth held that “the child is father to the man”, the idea being central to his major ode “Intimations on Immortality, from Recollections of Early Childhood” (1803-1806) and to other poems.

In nineteenth century representations, children became full characters and “could enjoy a literature that had been specifically designed for them” (Dupeyron-Lafay 7). Charles Dickens must be singled out from the rest of his contemporaries for his affectionate treatment of children, for which he was both praised and also criticized when he became too sentimental, as in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. The character of the child in his *Dombey and Son* has something “of the Romantics’ wise and visionary children,” and, I would add, something Shakespearean, too, when faced with imminent death, as Dupeyron-Lafay points out (5). As

we know, Dickens also wrote at length about cruelty, humiliation and violence directed against children.

In recent times, burdened, as they have been, with war and carnage, the theme of child victimization has again become central to many literary works, especially drama, as summarized in the conclusion of this paper.

Innocent Sufferers: Shakespeare's Wise Children

My argument is that Shakespeare valued and appreciated children, and was extremely sensitive to violence done to them, this violence being one aspect in which institutional power exerts its lethal force in Shakespeare's plays. In some of them, especially the histories, the child figures as the hateful *Other*, perceived as something to be insanely and irrationally feared and eliminated. Why does Shakespeare give children this status? Conceivably because he sees them as possessing extraordinary natural wisdom and insight which best expose the institutional cynicism and criminal intellect of the adult people in power, as I will now illustrate with episodes from *Richard III*, *Macbeth* and *King John*.

Richard III presents some of the cruellest scenes of child butchery in literature. The scenes showing Clarence's children after their father's murder are an introduction to the bloody elimination of children by those in pursuit of absolute power. The children mourn together with the adults, but they also see through the adults' crookedness: when King Edward dies in his turn and his wife Elizabeth begins to mourn, the Boy ironically comments: "Ah, aunt? You wept not for our father's death. How can we aid you with our kindred tears? "And the Girl: "Our fatherless distress was left unmoaned: Your widow-dolour likewise be unwept!" (Shakespeare, *Richard III* 38,II,i) The relative callousness of these children is an indication of the kind of cruel world in which they have grown up, not of their inborn cruelty. And generally speaking, throughout Shakespeare's opus, it can be inferred that Shakespeare believed in the natural goodness of man.

Richard heartlessly orders Tyrell to kill the princes, "those bastards in the Tower". After the "deed is done," Tyrell and the executioners he employs, Dighton and Forest--but not in the least Richard--show tenderness towards "the gentle babes" as Tyrell calls the princes, described in their death as "girdling one another / Within their alabaster innocent arms./ Their lips were four red roses on a stalk, / Which in their summer beauty kissed each other." "We smothered / The most replenished sweet work of nature / That from the prime creation e'er she framed," concludes Dighton, while Tyrell reports that "Hence both are gone with

conscience and remorse: /They could not speak; and so I left them both, / To bear this tidings to the bloody king.” (133, IV,ii)

In *Macbeth*, the wise child is the Son of Macduff, a child that seems to understand well the ways of the world in which he sees himself as one of the “poor birds” that “are not set for,” just before he learns that he has become important in Macbeth’s political game. He speaks with “wit”, expressing his knowledge of the world in which “there are liars and swearers enough to beat the honest men and hang up them” (Shakespeare, *Macbeth* 66, IV,ii). In his wisdom he is the equal of his mother, who knows that although she has done no harm, she is in “this early world, where to do harm / Is often laudable, to do good sometime / Accounted dangerous folly.” The woman and the child confront the murderers against whose accusation the Son defends his father’s honour. Another Child is ultimately crowned in *Macbeth*. Malcolm is young and innocent of crimes and faults: he comes with the green branches that symbolize new life, but he is not quite ignorant of the world—he knows all the vices, though only by name. Yet before Malcolm can be crowned, Macbeth’s head has to be brought on a sword. In the same way Malcolm’s father, the saintly old King Duncan, had his rule secured by savage butchery in battle, with Cawdor’s head impaled on a sword. “Power cannot be gained without violence” is Shakespeare’s implicit irony, and the violence frequently hits children. Partee observes that “The young children in the early *Richard III* have the same courage and precocity as does young Macduff in the later *Macbeth*.” He also notes that there is scarcely any representation of a happy and affectionate family in Shakespeare, one exception being the picture of the Macduffs, where we see both the parental couple’s love and the affection between mother and children (Partee 10).

In his first history play, *King John*, Shakespeare deals with the suffering and death of a child to appease the gods of war. (Cf. Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* and the sacrifice of Iphigenia). For this purpose Shakespeare makes his Arthur a child of nine or ten, while the historical Arthur was a young man of fourteen or so. The characters in *King John* are obviously divided into children or very young people and females, who all ultimately rebel against violence, and the older generation of men in power, kings and top clergy, whose basic motive appears to be greed.

Contrary to the view held by many eminent scholars that Shakespeare was acquainted with only one source when he wrote this play—the anonymous play *The Troublesome Rule of Iohn King of England*, dating from 1591--more recent research has shown that he must have known at least three historical sources as well, Holinshed and two Latin chroniclers, Matthew Paris and Ralph Coggesnall. Despite his historical knowledge,

Shakespeare was not at all interested in important historical events, not even in the famous *Magna Carta*, as many historians have pointed out, including G.M.Trevelyan who wrote: “Shakespeare’s *King John* shows that the author knew little and cared less about the Charter” (Trevelyan 149). This might be taken as Shakespeare’s explicit comment on “democracy”.

Shakespeare puts the child Arthur, nephew to King John, in the centre of his story. The child becomes the instrument of fulfilment for his own mother, the French King, his Uncle John, and even his grandmother Elinor. The loving and innocent child, “the pretty boy” as he is described, pleads with both sides for peace, but his words have little effect; the older generation is blinded with ambition, and the child consequently desires to die. Arthur pleading with the murderer resembles Dickens’ sufferers, the difference being that Dickens portrayed his characters with great emotion, which is absent in Shakespeare’s play, though the scenes with young Arthur provoke deep emotion in the reader and the spectator. Arthur promises he “will sit as quiet as a lamb” (Shakespeare, *King John* 55, IV,i), like an innocent sacrificial victim. Once he has fallen into the hands of an utter villain, King John, Arthur is imprisoned and is about to be blinded. Even his cruel goaler Hubert and the executioners, who, as elsewhere in Shakespeare’s plays, appear to be much more compassionate than their kings, wince and are deeply touched. Although they do melt and free him, Arthur is nevertheless killed while attempting to escape by jumping from the castle wall. The function of the episodes portraying Arthur’s martyrdom is to shed more light on John, whom Shakespeare imagined not only as a criminal, but as a prototype of criminal rulers.

As in *Macbeth*, it is ultimately another child who is brought forward to reconcile the embattled nobility in *King John*—the young Prince Henry (future Henry III). Unlike the historical Arthur, who was older than Shakespeare’s creation, the historical Prince Henry was younger than Shakespeare’s Henry, who is wise and controlled. This is both encouraging and ominous, for there is a hint that the Bastard will be the shadow ruler, and that the cycle of crime may be repeated.

The other young and innocent peacemaker in *King John* is Princess Blanche, daughter to the Spanish king, niece to John through his sister Elinor. The young Dauphin is only human while inspired by his love for her. He is not perfect without her—it is the “she” that he is lacking; she likewise becomes whole only in her relationship with him:

He is the half part of a blessed man,
Left to be finished by such a she;
And she a fair divided excellence,

Whose fullness of perfection lies in him (26, II,i).

They are married to unite lands in England and France, but when the kings of France and England are faced by the indomitable Cardinal Pandulph with the choice of breaking their friendship or being excommunicated by the Church of Rome, Blanche has to plead with both to choose the easier way, that is, excommunication. At this point the Dauphin betrays love by taking loss of friendship to be the easier way, and consequently suffers and repents. Blanche, unlike the men in power, thus stands for faith that does not need institutional reinforcement. She begs her husband on her knees, but he rejects her pleading, and she realizes that she will lose no matter which side wins the war. It does not take Lewis long to realize that he lost everything when he rejected her love for the sake of ambition, and that life, “a twice-told tale” (49, III,iv), has lost its glamour. “All days of glory, joy and happiness” (50, III,iv) are gone. When he is further persuaded that he will gain from young Arthur’s death, he knows that he will lose even his life. For the Cardinal, he is “green and fresh in this old world,” (51, III,iv) and the Bastard despises his “weakness.” Lewis finally opts out of the war and leaves the stage to others.

Although Lily B. Campbell’s essay on *King John* (1968) is chiefly devoted to an analogy between King John and Elizabeth I, who was similarly under threat as a ruler and was confronted with domestic treason and foreign enemy united (Arthur being represented by Mary, Queen of Scots), her apparently secondary remarks reveal what I deem to be the main issue Shakespeare was dealing with in this play: his primary interest in the child Arthur and the violence done to love and youth:

- 1) Shakespeare departs from historical sources, which mainly, starting with Holinshed, defend John against Arthur’s “treason.” But Shakespeare was not at all interested in Arthur’s struggle against John.
- 2) There is no evidence in Elizabethan chronicles that John admitted the death of Arthur, whereas Shakespeare makes him clearly the murderer.
- 3) Historically, the Pope and Pandulph did not participate in the fight between John and Arthur, but Shakespeare makes the representative of institutional religion an accomplice to the murder of the child, using it as a cause for rebellion (158-9). Faulconbridge, who is Shakespeare’s invention, can be interpreted as Shakespeare’s implicit commentary on the nature of institutional power. It is he who ultimately rules and embodies power; he is brave in battle to the point of criminality (he loots monasteries); he is opportunistic in trying to explain the political significance of Arthur’s death. He receives the news of Arthur’s death almost

coldly, and immediately pushes it aside as *raison d'état* requires: "Be great in act. As you have been in thought", he consoles John. "Away, and glister like the god of war,..." (73, V.i). The Bastard's dislike for Lewis, who is himself little more than a boy, is immense: "Shall a beardless boy, A cock'red silken wanton, brave our fields, And flesh his spirit in a warlike soil" (73, V.i) In his turn the Dauphin calls him the "brabblers," a term that suits him well, since he uses a lot of empty rhetoric. This is important because it is the Bastard who pulls the strings of power and who is obviously positioned against youth and innocence, together with John.

Lily B. Campbell challenges the views of others that in his history plays Shakespeare does not "seem to call for explanations beyond those which a whole heart and a free mind abundantly supply" (Mark Van Doren), that he betrays no bias (Stoll) and that he "shuns the problems of contemporary politics" (Campbell 4). Her own view is that in Shakespeare's history plays there is "a dominant political pattern characteristic of the philosophy of his age" (6). To me it seems that in Shakespeare's history plays this pattern is both constructed and deconstructed, as the previous analysis has, hopefully, shown¹.

Conclusion: Shakespeare Our Contemporary

His representation of child suffering is another theme that makes Shakespeare our contemporary and brings him close to the playwrights of today, whose primary interest has been the oppression of children by a system of violence which seems to be reverting to some medieval methods. Neil Postman based his study of the disappearance of childhood from around the 1950s onwards on, among other things, "the rise of crime perpetrated by and against children" (133). Edward Bond has devoted much of his playwriting and theoretical skill to illustrating crimes against children as the basis of modern systems of tyranny and war, and has shown how "The radical innocence [also observed by Shakespeare—my comment] becomes corrupted with the ideological social overlay, but never completely destroyed" (251). This theme was initiated in Bond's early play *Saved* with its notorious stoning of the baby. The same theme is prominent in a number of other British playwrights, notably Pinter and

¹ The subject of children in Shakespeare has been also treated in the book *Tragedija i savremeni svet*, Nastić, 2010, pp.53-58.

Kane. I shall focus here on Bond's *Red, Black and Ignorant*, Pinter's *Ashes to Ashes* and Sarah Kane's *Blasted*.²

The most appalling consequence of the rule of evil in these contemporary plays is the victimization of children as the most damaging symptom of moral disease. Bond's *Red, Black and Ignorant*, like most of his other plays, is about the process of how children, misused and abused by the system, become criminals. As in Pinter's and Kane's plays, in this play babies are taken away from their mothers. The root of wickedness is in the system of education that does not teach the truth. Each subsequent step in young people's growing up is a stage towards moral degradation (Learning, Eating, Selling, and Work). Eating is not satisfaction of basic human needs but expression of emotional starvation, though hunger is also presented as real in the images of starving children in camps. In a "free country" children are sold and bought like goods, as proof of their parents' cooperation with the state. The children of the system become soldiers whose only "basic training" is "kill or be killed." "You killed us for freedom", concludes the Monster. But freedom and democracy mean that "truth is suppressed and freedom hustled away to prison." (40) All this (brutality) begins at home when the Monster beats his wife and sells his son to the state to teach him how to become a murderer. Bond seems to have completed Shakespeare's project of the study of children in the society of adults, especially in his "The Dramatic Child" (1992).

In Harold Pinter's *Ashes to Ashes*, the woman gives up her child and engages in a morbid sexual excitement with the persecutor. In Kane's *Blasted*, Ian detests children, including his own grown-up son: "Who would have children. You have kids, they grow up, they hate you and you die" (Kane, *Blasted* 21) His hatred culminates in his eating the baby. The Soldier's description of the atrocities that target the weakest seems to build on Ian's hatred. Cate's initial care for the baby entrusted to her by the mother ends in her failure to protect the baby, and the baby dies. And so on: there are numerous instances of such representation of children in British drama, to mention only the unavoidable Mark Ravenhill and his bitter plays.

There are notorious examples in American drama of the representation of child sacrifice as built into the construction of the American Dream. The two notable cases are Edward Albee's *The American Dream*, an expressionistic rendering of the mutilation of

² These writers and plays have been the subject of another more extensive study presented at a conference (Nastić, ESSE 10, Torino 2010), and the afterword to a book, *Harold Pinter: Novi svetski poredak* (Nastić, 2011).

children in order to fit them into the preconception of a successful life, and Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*, which shows how the sacrifice of children results in disaster and misery.

Thus we may conclude that Shakespeare was a pioneer in the representation of child characters, and in this sense has remained a model to this day, and end this discussion with Harold Pinter's introductory note on Shakespeare in his *Various Voices* (5-7), where he states that in the art of theatre everything begins and ends with Shakespeare, who knew how to dramatize the "open wounds" of life, the deepest one, surely, being victimization of children.

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