

TONY PRINCE is a third year PhD student at the University of Sheffield, studying 'Bastardy and Illegitimacy in the plays of William Shakespeare'. He is the convenor of a Shakespeare community reading group called Sheffield's Shakespeare; a student rep on the Joint Staff Student Council; a member of the Arts and Humanities PGR Forum Committee; and has taught and delivered workshops on Shakespeare to undergraduates. Tony achieved an MA in Critical Theory from the University of Sussex and a BA single honours degree in English Literature from the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth.

[egp11acp@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:egp11acp@sheffield.ac.uk)

Article

# 'Bastards of the Time': the Violent Contexts and Dramatic Ancestry of Bastards and Illegitimates in *Titus Andronicus* and *King John*

Tony Prince



---

## Stage Vices and Violent Legacies: The Dramatic Lineages of Shakespeare's Bastards

AARON THE MOOR AND PHILIP THE BASTARD OFFER MUCH SCOPE for exploring the relationship between bastardy and violence, and the links of both to the theatrical tradition of the Vice. To begin with, I will examine the role of the Vice in two late medieval Morality plays, *The Castle of Perseverance* (1425), where a number of characters represent this type, and in *Mankind* (c. 1477), where the character of Myscheff is the primary Vice. This will allow a comparison of the Vice's typical features, characteristics and dramatic role, firstly in relation to the depiction of Aaron the Moor and his bastard newborn in *Titus Andronicus* (c. 1594), and secondly to the portrayal of the Bastard, Philip Faulconbridge, in *King John* (c. 1595).<sup>2</sup>

The roots of this theatrical type can be traced back to Ancient Rome, in Prudentius' *Psychomachia*<sup>3</sup> and Augustine's *City of God*, both written in the early fifth century. As Glynne Wickham explains, over time the 'angels and devils', essential to the Christian representation of the spiritual struggle within

Man, 'came to be augmented by their agents on earth in the battle for men's souls, the Virtues and the Vices'.<sup>4</sup> The idea of patterning and the interplay of order and disorder is structurally and thematically central to *The Castle of Perseverance*; <sup>5</sup> beginning with two standard-bearers spelling out the fundamental characteristics of the social, political and religious order (l. 1-10). The Prologue suggests that destructive, uncontrollable forces in the form of the illegitimate other, the bastard who degrades the family name, threatens Church and society in general, as well as the family; as 'there schal com a lythyr ladde' called 'I-Wot-Nevere-Who', who will 'eryth the erytage that never was of hys blod' (l. 109-11). Youth, especially if it is illegitimate, is associated with idleness ('lythyr' meaning 'lazy'), familial degradation and sin, whilst the importance of having a legitimate family name is also highlighted.

Later in the play this character actually appears, as Mankind's heir, just as the latter realises the outcome of sinful behaviour (2925), when he is informed that Mundus (The World) has identified a boy who 'schal have thy erytage' (2964-50) and pronounces that he is the very 'lythyr ladde' he had been warned of from the outset. Mankind fixates on the horror of this situation at length while dying, warning others of the dire consequences of lechery and adultery, thus strongly implying that this boy is his bastard son.

In the medieval Morality plays illicit sex, exorbitant sexuality, illegitimate conception and anti-social disruptiveness circulate around the Vice figures. In *The Castle of Perseverance* Luxuria (Lechery) celebrates sexual activity explicitly, looking forward to being 'bobbyd [...] in bed' with Mankind (1185) and delighting in the idea that 'I my cunte thou schalt crepe' (1195). Such overt physicality and sexual forwardness is linked to forcefulness and violence, as when Detraccio (Backbiter) boasts about his superhuman strength (1839). There is also a strong sense of the Vice's irrepressible animal vitality: Detraccio displays speed and agility (691), as does Invidia (Envy), who is 'flete as a fox' (938) and able to 'lepe as a lyon' (940). These physical features, forged with the allegorical abstractedness of their names, give these Vices a dramatic double-sidedness.

The Vices are belligerent and always quick to engage in direct verbal exchanges with their enemies, the Virtues. Ira (Wrath) insists that consistent verbal aggression enables domination through fear, and that Mankind should challenge anyone who opposes him, 'thane schal no man thee ovyr-lede' (1103). The Vices' self-assertive dominance is contrasted at first to Mankind's sense of 'shame' (284) and vulnerability in nakedness (278) but, under the influence of the Vices, he shifts positions, insisting that a beggar should 'sterve and stynke' rather than be helped (878-9). Ultimately, Mankind recognises the Vices as wicked tempters, and is saved, but only after a terrifying experience of inner struggle: 'Wyth this foul fiende I am ner mad' (2022). The play leaves us in no doubt that the Vices are ruinous to Mankind's soul and savour their role in accentuating human suffering, yet their rootedness, immediacy and verbal dexterity means that they nevertheless remain paradoxically alluring.

*Mankind* presents the same fundamental spiritual contest between good and evil as other plays in the Morality tradition. Mercy directly quotes bible stories, like Job's self-belief during tribulation (286-8)<sup>6</sup> and biblical aphorisms such as 'The corn shall be saved, the chaff shall be brent' (43),<sup>7</sup> and sums up how Mankind must act in order to fulfil his god-given role: 'Do truly your labour and keep your holy day' (300). In reply, Myscheff, the primary Vice, who exploits language for humorous effect from the outset of the play, interrupts and parodies Mercy's homiletic message and hectoring style with onomatopoeic, anaphoric constructions, 'Mish-mash, driff-draff | Some are

corn and some are chaff' (49-50), employing mock Latin phrases on ordinary subjects directed at the audience (56-60). He pretends to quote from a written source, offering a mock sermon in doggerel Latin (57), followed by a mock exegesis (59-63). Bernard Spivack notes that, 'as well as dramatizing the *Psychomachia*, the moralities verbalise it exactly'.<sup>8</sup> The rhyming ripostes Myscheff makes to Mercy's attempts to push him away (68-9) show him to be quick-witted and opportunistic. Moreover, his bawdy comment which follows, 'My dame said my name is Raff | Unshut your lock and take an ha'penny!' (51-2) again illustrates that his onomastic versatility is related to libido.

Robert Weimann goes further, explaining how Myscheff 'becomes particularly complex as he moves easily from dialogue to sportive self-expression and back to farcical dialogue', involving the ability to move from the representational locus of the stage to the *platea*.<sup>9</sup> This ability is central to the dramatic function of the Vice, and employed ubiquitously in *Mankind*. Nowadays and Nought arrive 'through the audience' (331) and immediately begin to sing, the former 'making the audience sing after him' (336). When music is used soon after to conjure up the Mephistophelean Titivillus, with Nought playing the 'Walsingham whistle' and punning on 'naughtiness', or licentiousness,<sup>10</sup> the audience would struggle not to be caught up in the merriment. Extra-dramatic elements are introduced when Newguise, one of the secondary Vices, approaches the owner of the property for a donation (468), and shortly after, confirms that he will visit other named local people (505-6). These elements are taken further still when the Vices seek donations from the audience to pay for Titivillus' appearance, their requests border on threats (466-74), as they transgress boundaries between character and player, life and theatre, *platea* and *locus* simultaneously. Weimann notes 'the traditional convention of popular audience address remained a trait of the comic or disreputable characters' and 'broke through the illusion of their role' to 'involve the least dignified members of the in the play world'.<sup>11</sup>

The Vice invariably glories in violence, and also embraces it, as when Newguise jokes about how he and his fellow criminals have been busy learning 'our neck-verse' (520), usually Psalm 50,<sup>12</sup> this legal 'loophole' sometimes enabling culprits to avoid hanging. *Mankind* strongly links the Vice with gallows humour and the latter in turn with risk. Newguise, for instance, talks about his fortuitous escape from hanging when 'the grace was, the halter brast asunder' (616), being typically blasphemous in his use of the spiritual term 'grace'. He is quickly followed by Myscheff, with his broken shackles still on, telling of his escape from near death, adding that he killed the jailer and had sex with this man's wife immediately after. The language of, and punning on, biological functions and genitalia are often the Vice's subject matter, as when Newguise jokes about losing 'my jewels' (381), and puns on 'chop' to repeat the idea of castration, when *Mankind* strikes him with his spade (441). Punning and verbal competition are closely linked, such as when Nowadays replies to Newguise's reference to Titivillus' enormous head with the proverbial phrase 'Keep your tail in goodness' (461-2).<sup>13</sup> Such references remind us that it is precisely these Vice characters who resemble the social types most likely to be on the receiving end of punishment for criminality, as well as most likely to be seen to be committing it.

Myscheff's revenge is to satirise the hierarchised power of church and state, creating a play within a play by conjuring up a pseudo-ecclesiastical court, and passing mock-sombre judgement that *Mankind* should 'go rob, steal and kill as fast as you may' (707). The madcap celebrations that follow his 'conversion' (719-24) invert and caricature the penal system of the Church and

its supposed 'redemptive' power. Myscheff takes the lampooning of ceremonials to new levels when he reads the proclamation '*Blottibus in blottis | Blottorum Blottibus istis*' (679-80). Ultimately, it is not only the Church which is reduced and exposed, but the Crown too, as the Vice gloats about the deposition of Edward IV in 1470, stating in Latin that it is the beginning of 'the regnal year of Edward the Nought [...] the regnal year of no king' (686-9) as if imagining a state of anarchy, while punning again on the immoral connotations of 'nought'. Conflicts over kingship and leadership, bastardy, lineage and legitimacy to rule were to become even more prominent in the sixteenth century, and this was reflected in the violence of its theatre.

### **Bastard Lineages and Theatrical Villainies: The Medieval Vice and the Shakespearean Illegitimate**

Some features of the medieval Vice are evident in Aaron's character and dramatic function in *Titus Andronicus*.<sup>14</sup> When he scornfully dismisses Chiron's lack of familiarity with 'a verse from Horace' (4.1.22), expressing contempt, his language is Vice-like, and his amused aside to the audience, doubly so: 'Now, what a thing it is to be an ass!' (4.1.25). His dismissal of prayer as a method of solving problems is equally direct, and again reminiscent of the Morality Vice: 'Pray to the devils; the gods have given us over' (4.1.48). Bernard Spivack recognises that 'the homiletic projection and bravura demonstration of the old morality role' of the Vice is located in Aaron.<sup>15</sup> He has no doubt this character was inspired by 'the theatrical image which descended to him from the allegorical stage', noting that Aaron is a dramatic invention, not mentioned in any of the classical sources of the play,<sup>16</sup> though it is based on accounts of ancient history.

Spivack focuses on the moment when we see Aaron at his most gratuitously malign, tricking Titus into cutting off his own hand, leading him to believe this will save his condemned sons; and how, in this moment, Aaron offers 'a sneering commentary that distils the essence of the role'.<sup>17</sup> Spivack hears Aaron 'breathe the Vice's laughter upon the grief of his victims',<sup>18</sup> when addressing the audience: 'Oh, how this villainy | Doth fat me with the very thought of it!' (3.1.201-2). We can add that Aaron's blunt advice to Demetrius and Chiron, advocating that they jointly rape Lavinia, as 'it seems some certain snatch or so | Would serve your turns' (2.1.95-6), with its onomatopoeic, colloquial and cruelly casual term 'snatch' offers a significant lexical resemblance to the old Vice's rudimentary language and dismissive tone, as well as to its preoccupation with illicit sex.

The very fact that Aaron can incite rape and simultaneously act with jocularly, with the demotic expression 'Clubs, clubs!' and the playfully satirical description of the quarrelling Demetrius and Chiron, Tamora's sons (2.1.37), links him to the Vices, who can, as noted previously, also be playful and threatening at the same time. Furthermore, when Demetrius insists Bassianus can be cuckolded, he quips that the same applies to Saturninus, in an aside (2.1.90), traversing the *platea*. He is able to unite the sons in a single purpose, flatter them, amuse them by extending the paranomasia (punning) and sexual innuendo of 'turn', inflame their desires with casual aplomb and hint that they can avoid responsibility for their acts, within a couple of clauses (2.1.129-31):

There speak and strike brave boys, and take you turns;  
There serve your lust, shadowed from heaven's eye'  
And revel in Lavinia's treasury.

The unnerving speed with which he reaches logical conclusions and carries the two youths with him reminds us of the medieval Vice figure, such as Detraccio and Invidia in *The Castle of Perseverance*, mentioned earlier. The monosyllabic simplicity of his 'offer' to Titus discussed above seems deliberately gauged to appeal to his ideals (3.1.152-5):

Let [...] any one of you, chop off your hand  
And send it to the king; he for the same  
Will send thee hither both thy sons alive.

The assumed horror he manifests when discovering the quarrelling brothers reinforced through erotema (a rhetorical question), 'dare ye draw?' (2.1.46-7) and optatio (an ardent wish), 'I would not for a million of gold' (1.1.49) is calculated to gain their attention and pique their curiosity. During the incident in which he gulls Titus, it is through his ironic ridicule in an aside that Aaron involves the audience in his plotting and 'reading' of the world around him, and his lampooning of 'straight' characters and simplistic concepts: 'If that be call'd deceit I will be honest' (3.1.188). It is through such reasoning that Aaron threatens to deconstruct and render meaningless any concept that is attached to the idea of order, either from an individual or collective perspective, and invites the audience to do the same.

Another interesting aspect of Aaron is that he is dramatically withheld while Rome tears itself apart during Act 1, thus setting the context in which he then ruthlessly pursues his own interests, like everyone else in the play. The 1594 Quarto shows that Aaron enters immediately after Titus, Tamora and her sons, and is still present at the end of Act 1, indicated by 'manet Moore' in the stage directions (1.1.495.1), meaning 'the Moor remains'.<sup>19</sup> If Aaron is on stage during Act 1, he is likely to have watched the darkly farcical action unfold with insouciance as well as scepticism. It also reminds us that the Vice-type character is at home in the stage *platea*, and is present and active in a range of ways during performance. Disguise, counterfeit and doubleness are key features of the play, and become key to the success of Titus' revenge motive. Aaron is shown to be an arch deceiver and artful performer among many who aspire to such a level.

Having said this, there is one notable way in which Aaron diverges significantly from the role of the Vice, albeit only temporarily, being given the privilege of a soliloquy on entry, which ironically turns out to be an exemplum of classical style. The soaring rhetoric he uses to describe Tamora's rising social status contrasts to the formulaic political speeches of Act 1; alliterative images of astrological beauty outshine the sordid earthly power-plays and interpersonal enmities of Rome (2.1.5):

As when the golden sun salutes the morn  
And, having gilt the ocean with its beams,  
Gallops the zodiac in his glistening coach.

Aaron describes an intense, exceptional eroticism between them, 'fetter'd in golden chains' (2.1.15). His salacious relish for sexual pleasure, coupled with his dream of toppling Saturninus and subverting the Roman state aligns him with the traditional Vice. In fact, we can say that Aaron seems to have access to a range of registers, and can use these to achieve his ends in different contexts, seemingly able to occupy two otherwise contradictory poles of speech and behaviour, as if he were both Vice and budding hero simultaneously.

Rome, presented in detail in Act 1, is a society in which innovation seems alien. Words like 'gracious', 'noble' and 'worthy' proliferate in the first act, as if Rome and its representatives need to repeatedly inscribe themselves within a 'virtuous circle'. The pomp and ceremony contrasts to the 'pageantry and festive spectacle' of the kind of public spectacle we find imitated in *The Castle of Perseverance*, according to David Bevington.<sup>20</sup> The language of high status and worth is insistently articulated in tandem with the drawing up of battle lines, as members of an elite vie for supremacy. The contexts in which illegitimacy occurs most often in Shakespeare, namely, within the political leadership and their families, are extensively scrutinised and interrogated in this play. Saturninus' focus on his own right as 'first-born son', and the way he naturalises his claim to the emperorship with the suggestion that the populace should 'let my father's honours live in me', sets in motion the inextricably linked and highly contentious issues of political and familial primacy. Violent events flare up with seeming inevitability in these circumstances: Bassianus abducts Saturninus' bride; and Titus slays a son for insubordination. Cynthia Marshall draws attention to the way in which 'perversely literalised metaphors' operate within the play, and concludes that it is through this method that 'Shakespeare calls attention to the collapse or reversion of language into violent action'.<sup>21</sup> In this respect we can see Aaron's eloquence, a product of his otherness, the fact that he doesn't belong to Rome and its extended family, or to family at all, an antidote to the domination of such destructive forces in society, as much as it reminds us of the traditional religious warning about the dangers of human aspirations for power and glory.

### The Endgame in *Titus Andronicus*: Fears, Threats and Rejecting the Other

In *Titus Andronicus* Aaron and Tamora's newborn is described by the Nurse as 'loathsome as a toad | Amongst the fair-faced breeders of our clime' (4.2.67-8), and 'a devil' (4.2.63), a view Demetrius endorses, describing Aaron as a 'hellish dog', bemoaning his mother's 'loathed choice' of lover, and cursing the 'offspring of so foul a fiend' (4.2.77-9), linking physical monstrosity, race and wickedness. The nurse's condemnation also reveals glaring contradictions within such an ideology since The Goth queen's two sons, Demetrius and Chiron, have committed the heinous rape and mutilation of Lavinia, with their mother's enthusiastic endorsement (2.3.187-91). The original conception of dramatic demons can be said to have become a process of demonization by the late sixteenth century. Just as Aaron's eulogy on Tamora's success shows the integration of a contemporary humanist aspect with a traditional Vice element in Aaron, so his response to seeing his child, when his unusually gentle, alliterative response, 'Sweet blowze, you are a beauteous blossom, sure' (4.2.72), offers a glimpse of Aaron's positive emotionality, and thus, once more, of a paradoxical element in his character, the humanisation, and hence hybridisation, of the Vice apparent here.

The nurse supports Tamora's wish that Titus carry out the literal cutting up of the child, its murder, by 'christen[ing] it with thy dagger's point' (4.2.70), illustrating a shared desire to sacrifice 'the other' in order to maintain the sense of a distinct identity, uncomfortably juxtaposed to the mutilation of the body of Lavinia, which is associated with, and leads to, her willing embrace of ritualised death. The baby becomes dehumanised in the bitter recriminations regarding its presence. Moreover, Aaron's use of violence, seen in his ruthless killing of the nurse, takes place in a context where nobody is innocent, except

his own offspring, but where that child is marked with the projected signs of intrinsic illegitimacy and debasement, as if it were the source of wickedness. The play asks us to question the nature of a society which generates such a dynamic.

The unspoken threat that a fissure or malformation might appear within the political and familial structures of the elite is made to seem ever-present in *Titus Andronicus*, and Aaron, outside of this formation, could be said to be the only character to understand this. An imaginary 'hole' exists at the centre of the play that is literalised in the hole in the ground in which Demetrius and Chiron kill and rape, the latter implicitly opening up the possibility of an illegitimate birth; one that is exploited by the illegitimate Aaron to further his own ends. The puncturing and mutilating of the physical body of Lavinia, with its affective disturbance for the audience, made present in a protracted way over a number of scenes, is then transferred to, and dramatically realised in, the bringing on stage of the bastard baby, symbolising rupture, jeopardy and vulnerability. Aaron himself is finally delivered to the 'hole' in the ground, at the same time as he is denounced as being an 'accursed devil' (5.3.5) who must be 'Set [...] breast-deep in earth' and left to die of hunger (5.3.178). He shows no remorse, wishing only that he could perform 'ten thousand worse than ever yet' (5.3.185), rejecting 'base prayers' (5.3.184) like his Vice ancestors before him. All he seems to have left is his notoriety, as he is confined to what amounts to a hell on earth, yet among his parting words he insists 'I am no baby' (5.3.184), and by doing so inadvertently brings the concept of the newborn child figuratively back on stage, reminding us that we do not know whether it has been killed, perhaps therefore inviting the audience to choose whether we might redeem this child from its 'hole' of social rejection and death.

### ***King John*: Illegitimate Power and the Power of Illegitimacy**

*King John* (c. 1595) begins with an assertion of monarchical right, which is immediately challenged from within the royal family itself. The king insists he rules due to his 'strong possession and our right' (1.1.38), but his mother, Queen Eleanor, corrects him, 'Your strong possession much more than your right' (1.1.39), disabusing John of the illusion of fundamental legitimacy. This is compounded by the French envoy, Chatillon, saying Arthur, son of John's elder brother, has a 'most lawful claim' to the throne (1.1.8-9), which becomes the pretext for war between England and France. The play further links these questions of legitimacy and identity when the king and queen recognise the physiognomic link between the Bastard Philip Faulconbridge and his biological father, Richard I, thus locating the issue of bastardy at the heart of royal rule and lineage. William Matchett notes, on the other hand, that 'though the word "right" is used sixteen times in Act 1, it is eclipsed by the recurring threat of bloodshed to which it is leading', noting the repetition of 'blood' and its cognates four times in this act, and 26 times in Act 2.<sup>22</sup> We can certainly say that this metonymic escalation, suggesting a disease affecting the king and society, which does indeed take hold later in the play, may also be present here in the confrontations and controversies regarding status, identity and legitimacy.

On entering with his brother Robert, Philip Faulconbridge is immediately assertive, presuming to answer for them both when the king asks who they are (1.1.50-2):

Your faithful subject I, a gentleman,  
Born in Northamptonshire, and eldest son  
As I suppose, to Robert Faulconbridge.

Philip Faulconbridge dominates the stage from the moment he enters, disrupting the sense of order and hierarchy, initiating and directing dialogue, introducing himself at length and laying out the grounds of the disagreement with his brother openly (1.1.73-83). His language combines elevated and basic features, like the palindrome-like reversal of 'one [...] one [...] on' to 'no [...] no [...] none' (1.1.50-83); the coupling of divergent themes, 'Heaven guard my mother's honour, and my land!' (1.1.70); and the mingling of formal terms, like 'heaven' (1.1.62; 1.1.70) and 'faithful' (1.1.50), with demotic and proverbial phrases, like 'a pops me out', and 'fair fall the bones' (1.1.78). These verbal contrasts give a sense of barbed play and performance as The Bastard melds informal and formal language, courtesy and facetiousness, seamlessly, like Aaron, and the Vices before him. This verbal dexterity is accompanied by a physical nimbleness, as King John's reaction implies, 'Why, what a madcap hath heaven lent us here!' (1.1.84); while Eleanor's angry response when he imputes his mother's adultery, 'Out on thee, rude man!' (1.1.64), suggests a clowning element. His irrepressible energy, sharp sense of humour and realisation that 'the spirit of the time will teach me speed' (4.2.176) all remind us of his dramatic ancestry.

It is important to remember that the Bastard has not sought out his lost or hidden family. The meeting is accidental, though dramatically crucial, giving a sense of radical uncertainty and ephemerality. Phyllis Rakin argues that '*King John* depicts a world in which no actions are conclusive',<sup>23</sup> capturing the sense of absurdity, uncertainty and disorientation. Unstable situations and the rapid fluctuations of fortune increasingly feature in the play, and it is Philip who manages these difficulties best, through unshakeable self-confidence and his ability to capture the absurdity of life's vicissitudes, such as when he gives up his inheritance to embrace his illegitimate royal identity: 'A foot of honour better than I was | But many a many foot of land the worse' (1.1.182-3). He wittily alludes to his own 'baseness' in the repetition of the word 'foot' here, but also puts 'glory' sceptically in perspective, as well as reminding us of the value of down-to-earth awareness and political sure-footedness. The Bastard's wit is also his anchor, which means he is never in danger of being seduced by dreams of grandeur. In fact his role repeatedly involves puncturing bombast and self-delusion. Just as Aaron is a fictive insertion into a historical narrative, there is no evidence that the Philip Faulconbridge character is historical. Shakespeare derived him and his bastardy from an anonymous text written shortly before *King John*, called *The Troublesome Reign of King John*. Both Philip and Aaron are unencumbered by their heritage and able to voice taboos related to lineage and status. Philip, for instance, finds his repositioning and renaming as Sir Richard Plantagenet ridiculous, and makes a point of reminding us of his own illegitimacy and its quite widespread nature when interrupting King John. Moreover, he qualifies the two kings' conventional adumbration of the quality of their military forces by interrupting to remind everyone that they also include 'bastards else' (2.1.276) and 'some bastards too' (2.1.279).

Philip resembles Aaron and, at a further remove, the Vice in another way. Just as Aaron alone speaks in soliloquy at a key moment in the action in *Titus Andronicus*, the same is true of Philip in *King John*. In it, he sees the absurdity and danger inherent in the freedom of action he has suddenly been given: 'now can I make any Joan a lady' (1.1.184), though it is noticeable that Philip Faulconbridge manifests virtually no signs of the hyper-sexualised



mentality of the traditional Vice. Instead, he plays a political and critical role, lampooning the casual wastefulness of privilege (1.1.189-201) and, as R. A. Foakes says, 'mocks his new status by parodying conversations [...] of what he mockingly calls "worshipful society"'.<sup>24</sup>

Astutely acknowledging that his social transformation opens up new opportunities, and wittily inverting the concept of illegitimacy, the Bastard implies that it is those complacent individuals with conventional minds for whom stasis is the norm who fail to notice the signs of opportunity and risk around them: 'For he is but a bastard to the time | That does not smack of observation' (1.1.198).

This powerfully illustrates the bifurcated or self-doubling nature of the Bastard's personality. We also realise that this very society, with its discrepant and malformed structures, its quasi-random distribution of power and opportunity, of people misplaced in time and space and divided among themselves, causes a kind of social convulsion, just as Philip Faulconbridge realises: 'Mad world! Mad kings! Mad composition!' (2.1.56). Richard Hillman notes that the Bastard, 'introduced into the appalling milieu of political power-broking', nevertheless retains an 'irrepressible subversiveness and cynical detachment' which is Vice-like.<sup>25</sup> However, his existence is required by a society built on the necessity to defend the spurious and questionable honour of elevated positions, and in this respect, the humanised quasi-Vices of the late sixteenth century are limited in their thoughts and actions by very different forces than those to which the Vices are subjected in medieval Morality plays. By accepting his title, Philip Faulconbridge is required to avenge his father's death, and this requirement is only exacerbated by the fact that his killer, Lymoges, Duke of Austria smugly wears the 'lion case' or battle armour, of his dead father. Initially Philip Faulconbridge achieves this in a characteristically humorous manner, spontaneously intervening to puncture Lymoges' attempt to silence Eleanor and Constance with the call 'Hear the crier!' (2.1.134), but this taunting has a malicious edge, as he verbally harries this character, humiliating him in public in verbal spats, comparing him to the ass carrying Alcides' shoe (2.1.144).

By taking every opportunity to incite his formal enemy, Philip Faulconbridge plays a part in multiplying social uncertainties and anxieties, such as when he goads Austria with the repetition of Constance's contemptuous final words to him (3.1.54-5). King John himself insists, in his only overt criticism of the Bastard in the play, that 'we like not this' (3.1.60), but the Bastard ignores the king's authority, returning to continue the one-sided verbal combat, interrupting Austria in mid-flow and directing his sentence back upon the speaker (3.1.126-7). He then completes his humiliation of Austria by recycling Constance's original line, with its grammar and syntax deftly altered, trumping Austria with a rhyme, even as the battle preparations commence (3.1.145-6):

Austria: Do so, King Philip; hang no more in doubt.  
Bastard: Hang nothing but a calf's-skin, most sweet lout.

The Bastard casually threatens Austria with violence, a threat which he carries out almost immediately, killing Austria summarily and appearing on stage with only a cursory comment on the killing, as he lobs Austria's decapitated head away (3.2.3). This is another instance of the Bastard pushing boundaries to the limit, taking advantage of the weaknesses of others, in typical Vice fashion, as he uses the skirmish as an excuse to seek personal revenge. On the other hand, his reaction to completing this task is to remain detached and neutral, rather

than glorying in and publicising his success. Similarly, though he looks forward to ransacking the English monasteries for John, when he returns, he only expresses fatigue 'how I have sped [...and] travaill'd', (4.2.141-3) and hands over 'the sums of money I have collected' (4.2.142) without further comment. In this respect, we see a more enigmatic side of the Bastard emerge, which can be traced back to these acts of violence, aligning him less with the Vice, and more with the morality play protagonist, corrupted by violence and greed.

### Rising Tide and Salvaged Pride: The Outbreak and its Aftermath

In the second half of the play the Bastard becomes King John's brains and assumes leadership of the campaign to subdue rebellion long before John explicitly asks him to 'Have the ordering of this present time' (5.2.77). The Bastard has already noted that, though the world is dominated by the duplicities of 'commodity', nevertheless, 'Since kings break faith upon commodity, | gain, be my lord, and I will worship thee!' (2.1.598-9). His sense of excitement is shared, as a fervent optimism stirs up the murky waters of conflagration, King Philip of France, insisting they will have to 'Wade to the market-place in Frenchmen's blood' (2.1.45), while King John arrives supported by Eleanor, 'stirring him to blood and strife' (2.1.63). When King John appears with his army, his perfunctory attitude and thinly-disguised revulsion at 'their proud contempt' (2.1.88), which mirrors his own, only exacerbates the crisis. The main participants seem determined to escalate the conflict, just as Vices seek to multiply mischief.

King Philip accuses England and John of having 'cut off the sequence of posterity' (2.1.96), a phrase which is resonant of the wider issues of legitimacy and illegitimacy in the play. He characterises the usurpation of Arthur's right graphically as 'a rape | [u]pon the maiden virtue of the crown', employing metaphor, collocation and synecdoche in his verbal armoury, as the stakes rise. As the emotional temperature rises, the overheated dialogue begins to disintegrate into a reductive polyptotic exchange of accusation and counter-accusation of usurpation, traded between two royalties (2.1.119-122). The argument deteriorates further into vituperative imputations of infidelity between the two most senior female members of royalty, Eleanor and Constance: 'thy bastard will be king' (2.1.122); '[Your] good grandma [...] would blot thee' (2.1.133).

The Bastard, meanwhile is only aware that 'the day grows wondrous hot' and speculates that 'some airy devil hovers in the sky' (3.2.1-2), as if the disruptive mischief he has employed with effect up to this point is now a much darker entity, or perhaps as if the Vice, which partly inhabited the Bastard, has been superseded by an altogether more malign one. Several critics see a significant change in Philip the Bastard at this point in the play, Foakes describing it as from 'swashbuckling independence [...to] dog-like loyalty' to the crown.<sup>26</sup> Hillman, on the other hand, believes that 'the cynicism defined and maintained by the state of outrageous outsider has been lost, and with it [...] a form of innocence', and confirms that he means that this essentially relates to the Fall of Man.<sup>27</sup> My opinion is that it is rather the change of situation which alters the Bastard, turning his Vice-like qualities into a version of Virtue-like strength in these extreme circumstances. He is a dramatic experiment, testing how similar the traditional Vice and the national hero might be.

As the environment becomes increasingly difficult for him to survive in, Philip the Bastard comes increasingly to recognise the desolation of the state, which he is fighting to uphold (4.3.146-8):

England now is left  
To tug and scramble, and to part by th' teeth  
That unowned interest of proud swelling state.

He empathises with a people left to fend for itself in a world, which has been reduced to a crude struggle for survival. The metaphor of 'the bare pick'd bone of majesty' lying worthless before the viciously snarling 'dogged war' (4.3.149-50) suggests that neither he nor the country has gained from the conflict.

This reaction against the consequences of war becomes Philip the Bastard's dominant strain. He employs moralistic language to condemn the death of Arthur and the failure of powerful adults around him to ensure his safety 'It is a damned and a bloody work' (4.3.57) and the hyperbolic pathos of his reflection regarding the wider context confirms this Virtue-like combination of affectivity and reverence (4.3.143-4):

From forth this morsel of dead royalty  
The life, the right, and truth of all this realm  
Is fled to heaven.

The Bastard stands up not only for himself and other bastards but for the victims who are radically displaced from their families and almost always severely restricted in terms of the power and opportunities available to them, like a kind of alternative hero. He understands that people are subject to forces that can tear them apart, just as Blanche, King John's niece who marries Louis the Dauphin of France, experiences the separation between her family and her new husband, as they go to war with each other, as a kind of dismembering: 'Each arm hath a hand [...] They whirl asunder and dismember me' (3.1.254-6). The fact that individuated body parts, especially the hands (as here) and feet repeat metonymically throughout the play enhances this sense of a general, deep dissociation of elements, just as the family, as a unit, seems radically dispersed and fragmented. During the period of strife both Louis and Philip the Bastard lose large numbers of soldiers, 'taken by the tide' which has 'devoured them' (5.6.40-1), which only adds to the sense that the crisis is universal, once again echoing the biblical injunctions which underpin the *Morality* play.

However, there is also the sense of a denouement and a post-catastrophe phase at the end of the play. In the end, the terrifying storm recedes, and a new leader emerges. The dying King John imagines allowing 'my kingdom's rivers to take their course through my burned bosom' (5.7.38-9), suggesting a kind of acceptance, and of a return to settled conditions after the radical fissuring that has characterised the increasingly fraught process to this point. The all-inclusive nature of this eventual balm, this idea of an underlying spiritual force returning to recompose reality even affects the Bastard, who complains of himself being 'scalded with my violent motion' (5.7.51) a burning sickness which he shares with John, whose heart is 'crack'd and burn'd' (5.7.52). It is as if this recognition of shared pain, between an ersatz father and son, is necessary for the healing, quenching and relieving process to begin. Rather than a single protagonist being the focus of redemption, society as a whole, including its seemingly irredeemable parts, is given relief.

Ultimately, though, The Bastard remains essentially unchanged at the end of the play, despite the terrible tests that he has had to endure, noting

wryly that Pandulph is much more likely to follow up on his promise of peace if the English remain 'well-sinew'd to our defence', ready for any eventuality, including more war (5.7.87-8). He enthusiastically accepts Prince Henry as the true heir to the throne and leaves the stage with a characteristically ringing endorsement of the potential positivity of the future of the nation: 'Nought shall make us rue If England to itself do rest but true!' (5.7.117-8). Rakin argues 'the Bastard has no real place in history, neither in the chain of a patriarchal successor... nor the historical record'.<sup>28</sup> In a sense, some find his shift from marginalised subversive to 'a high seriousness, reflecting his committed participation in the affairs of state', as Hillman puts it, disappointing.<sup>29</sup> However, the fact that he can acknowledge that future unity is only conditional whilst speaking with such certitude and ebullience implies that he intends to maintain his critical perspective on the political situation. The fact that he makes no attempt to seize power in order to satisfy his desires or his right might be said to represent how efficiently he has expunged the destructive Vice from his character. Nevertheless, if we accept the punning inference in 'nought' in this final flourish we can also say that this statement is both more mischievous and more elusive than it might otherwise appear, so that he ultimately remains true to himself and his dramatic heritage.

Aaron and Philip the Bastard have both been shown to embody significant Vice material and to play similar roles to the Vice in many ways in the two plays considered, whilst they have also been shown to have moved to a more humanised context, and in Philip's case even to threaten to invert the *Psychomachia* polarities of Vice and Virtue. We have also seen that Vice qualities can migrate, alter and recombine in various ways, being no longer located in a single, self-contained type, but tending to inhabit non-conventional and outsider-type figures, embodying otherness and difference. Bastardy represents the place where the dramatic material of the Vice seems to combine most readily with that of the marginalised or problematised human to produce a hybrid, character forming a complex unity out of disparate elements, while Vice elements are increasingly seen to migrate between characters and take on multivalent forms in late sixteenth-century plays.

University of Sheffield

---

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Life and Death of King John*, from *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), I, pp. 231-61 (p. 235). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.
- <sup>2</sup> Constraints of space mean that it is not possible to explore the sixteenth century version of the Vice here, though the thread is evident in plays, such as *Magnificence*, *Youth*, *Hick Scorner*, *The Three Laws*, *Horestes* and *Cambyses*, for example.
- <sup>3</sup> Aurelia Prudentius Clemens, *Psychomachia*, Valenciennes Public Library, MS 412, The European Library  
<<http://www.theeuropeanlibrary.org/tel4/virtual/regia?record=2000061252772&index=2&query=prudentius&view=preview>> (accessed: 11 January 2014).
- <sup>4</sup> Glynne Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1974), p. 27.
- <sup>5</sup> Anonymous, *The Castle of Perseverance*, in *Four Morality Plays: The Castle of Perseverance, Magnyfycence, King Johan, Ane Satire of The Thrie Estaitis*, ed. Peter Happé (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), pp. 75-210.

- 6 Job 23: 10.  
7 Luke 3: 12.  
8 Bernard Spivack, *Shakespeare and The Allegory of Evil: The History of a Metaphor in Relation to his Major Villains* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), p. 73.  
9 Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 102. Weimann shows how the traditional concepts of *locus* (the self-contained, illusory playworld) and *platea* (the physical space within which the illusory world is placed, including stage and audience) are regularly juxtaposed in the Morality tradition.  
10 The OED entry for 'nought' Adj., gives 4b 'of an action, etc.: bad, wicked'; and 4c 'morally wrong, immoral; (with reference to sexual behaviour) promiscuous' in this period.  
11 Weimann, *Popular Tradition in the Theater*, p. 103.  
12 Anonymous, *Mankind*, in *Three Late Medieval Morality Plays: Mankind, Everyman, Mundus et Infans*, ed. G. A. Lester (London: Ernest Benn, 1981), pp. 1-57 (p. 32; note on l. 520).  
13 OED, 'tail' for female genitalia dates to 1390, while 'head' had the meaning both of the end of the penis (c. 1400) and a nipple (c. 1398) in this period too.  
14 William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus, The Most Lamentable Tragedy of Titus Andronicus*, in *Complete Works*, ed. by Wells and Taylor, III, pp. 1021-51. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.  
15 Spivack, *Allegory of Evil*, p. 381.  
16 Spivack, *Allegory of Evil*, p. 380.  
17 Spivack, *Allegory of Evil*, p. 381.  
18 Spivack, *Allegory of Evil*, p. 381.  
19 *Titus Andronicus*, ed. Eugene M. Waith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) p. 18.  
20 David M. Bevington, *From Mankind to Marlowe: Growth of Structure in the Popular Drama of Tudor England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 115.  
21 Cynthia Marshall, *The Shattering of the Self: Violence, Subjectivity and Early Modern Texts* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 112.  
22 William H. Mathett, 'Richard's Divided Heritage in *King John*', in *Shakespeare's Histories: An Anthology of Modern Criticism*, ed. by William A. Armstrong (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp. 145-169 (p. 149).  
23 Phyllis Rackin, *Stages of History: Shakespeare's English Chronicles* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 183.  
24 Richard A. Foakes, *Shakespeare and Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 84.  
25 Richard Hillman, *Shakespearean subversions: the trickster and the play-text* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 43.  
26 Foakes, *Shakespeare and Violence*, p. 88.  
27 Hillman, *Shakespearean Subversions*, p. 46.  
28 Rakin, *Stages of History*, p. 187.  
29 Hillman, *Shakespearean Subversions*, p. 45.

## Works Cited

### Primary Sources

- Anonymous, *The Castle of Perseverance*, in *Four Morality Plays: The Castle of Perseverance, Magnyfycence, King Johan, Ane Satire of The Thrie Estaitis*, ed. Peter Happé (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), pp. 75-210
- Anonymous, *Mankind*, in *Three Late Medieval Morality Plays*, ed. by G. A. Lester (London: Ernest Benn, 1981), pp. 1-57.
- Clemens, Aurelia Prudentius, *Psychomachia*, Valenciennes Public Library, MS 412, The European Library  
<<http://www.theeuropeanlibrary.org/tel4/virtual/regia?record=2000061252772&index=2&query=prudentius&view=preview>> (accessed: 11 January 2014).

- 
- Shakespeare, William, *The Life and Death of King John*, in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), I, pp. 231-61
- Shakespeare, William, *The Most Lamentable Tragedy of Titus Andronicus*, in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), III, pp. 1021-51
- Shakespeare, William, *Titus Andronicus*, ed. Eugene Waith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984)

### Secondary sources

- Bevington, David, *From Mankind to Marlowe: Growth of Structure in the Popular Drama of Tudor England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962)
- Foakes, Richard, *Shakespeare and Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003)
- Hillman, Richard, *Shakespearean Subversions: The Trickster and the Play-Text* (London: Routledge, 1992)
- Marshall, Cynthia, *The Shattering of the Self: Violence, Subjectivity and Early Modern Texts* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2002)
- Mathett, William, 'Richard's Divided Heritage in *King John*', in William A. Armstrong, ed., *Shakespeare's Histories: An Anthology of Modern Criticism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp. 145-169.
- Rackin, Phyllis, *Stages of History: Shakespeare's English Chronicles* (London: Routledge, 1990)
- Spivack, Bernard, *Shakespeare and The Allegory of Evil: The History of a Metaphor in Relation to his Major Villains* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958)
- Weimann, Robert, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978)
- Wickham, Glynne, *The Medieval Theatre* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1974)