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Childish Conventions: The Generic Absence of Children  
in Early Modern Drama

by

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To the Graduate Faculty:

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## Childish Conventions: The Generic Absence of Children in Early Modern Drama

Thesis Abstract – Idaho State University (2018)

This thesis will argue that children are absent from Renaissance Dramas almost completely because they do not fit within the generic conventions of any of the three major types of dramas. To argue this, I will provide a thorough background that explains the oddity of children's absence from Renaissance drama. Then, I will explore each major genre through a play that goes against convention and displays children on stage in order to examine how they interact with a genre's main themes. I will look specifically at *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (c. 1613) by Thomas Middleton for Comedy, *The Duchess of Malfi* (c.1612) by John Webster for Tragedy, and *King John* (c.1596) by William Shakespeare for History. I will argue that each of these unique plays' meta-generic themes allow for, and in fact encourage, the use of children to enhance the generic themes of materiality, sexuality and patriarchy.

Key Words: children, genre, Early Modern Drama, Renaissance, sexuality, patriarchy, comedy, tragedy, history

## INTRODUCTION

Early modern drama is obsessed with the family. Overbearing parents impose their wills on children, who struggle to assert their independence. Lovers forsake their families. Average people turn into revengers after a family member is murdered unjustly. Siblings struggle to control one another's sexuality. Men tame women to be the kind of wife they desire. Women likewise tame men. Children betray their parents. Parents kill their children. The list goes on and on. The family was clearly of great interest to Renaissance theater-goers, providing dozens of unique problems to be explored and examined. It is striking then that one group that is nearly absent from the stage— children. There are many examples of the parent-child relationship, but only a very few contain an actual child—that is, a child below a minimal age for marriage and puberty (about age 13). Those that are present are the first to be murdered. So that begs the question. Where are the little ones?

The relative absence of children is especially puzzling because so many of the plays deal with the family, and indeed even take place partially or wholly in the domestic sphere. Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (c.1601) and John Fletcher's *The Woman's Prize* (c.1611) take place almost exclusively within a household setting. Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker's *The Roaring Girl* (c.1611) takes characters through many day-to-day tasks, from meal times at home to shopping on the street, but children do not appear in any scene. The anonymously written *Arden of Faversham* (c.1588-92) focuses on a "decaying household and a 'deformed family'" (Sullivan 79). With the renaissance view that the private and public spheres were "overlapping and interanimating" (Sullivan 73), the play explores the roles of everyone in the household, from the master to wives, servants and tenants. Everyone, that is, except for children.

In describing the family, one early modern author wrote, “[T]he master ‘doth somewhat resemble the Sovereign Prince, his Children the Nobility or second estate, and the Body of Servants beareth some similitude to the Commons’” (qtd. in Orlin 61). While this analogy focuses on the ordering of the state (Prince, Nobles, and Commons), it also tells us something of the status of children—they are second, above servants. Yet if children are the “second estate” while servants represent the lower “Commons,” it is curious that there is no shortage of servants and vagabonds while there is a gaping lack of children. Children were obviously a part of the domestic sphere, but few, if any, plays give them a chance to perform their role.

The relative absence of children is stranger still when we realize that there are pregnancies in several of the plays, but few cases result in the birth of a child. Under threat of death, both Joan of Arc in Shakespeare’s *Henry VI Part 1* (c. 1591) and the maid Cariola in Middleton’s *The Duchess of Malfi* (c. 1612) plead with their executioners to spare them because they are with child. It is unclear in either case whether this is true or whether they are women grasping at straws to save themselves, but the murderers in both plays imply that the women’s “credit’s saved” because the illegitimate child will never come to light (*Duchess* 4.2.253). Then they kill the women. *Hamlet*’s (perf. 1600) Ophelia also hints at a pregnancy and abortion shortly before killing herself. Even the Lord Antonio’s wife in Thomas Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (perf. 1606) kills herself after she is raped, explaining in a note that it is “better to die in virtue than live in shame” (1.4.23). The First Judge in Junior Brother’s court sentencing exclaimed, “That lady’s name has spread such a fair wing/ Over all Italy,” adding that she is a “general-honest lady” (1.2.56-7; 46). Others call her a “religious lady” (1.1.111), a “virtuous lady” (1.4.6), a “wondrous lady, of rare fire compact” (1.4.48) and a “precedent for wives” (1.4.7). Since her whole identity seems to be tied up in her virtue, it seems possible that

she killed herself to prevent a child from coming of the shameful event. Somehow or other, all the women who could introduce a child into the world of the play end up dying before the birth takes place. There are exceptions; Tamora in *Titus Andronicus* and Middleton's *Duchess* both give birth during the course of their plays. But Tamora's baby only appears twice, and two of the Duchess' three children are rarely seen onstage, usually hidden in a perambulator to emphasize their extreme youth. The Duchess' eldest son, though slightly older than his siblings, is only scripted into two scenes and is not given any lines. Given the many opportunities early modern playwrights had to include children into their plays, it becomes even more apparent that they deliberately chose to exclude them.

Why? This thesis argues that playwrights left children out of early modern dramas because they disrupt the generic conventions of each of the three main genres of the period – Comedies, Tragedies and Histories. I realize that this is an odd thesis when there seem to be so many simpler explanations, such as the technical difficulties of finding child actors, or the theory that children were seen as “little adults” and childhood was not a recognized stage of life during the period. Before discussing my argument for genre, then, it is important to address these other possibilities.

### **Children in Early Modern Drama and Culture**

Perhaps the most intuitive explanation for the absence of children on the Renaissance stage is that there were technical problems with finding children to act such roles. One might think that children are more difficult to find, direct, and discipline, and therefore, the logistical and administrative problems of children would have mitigated their presence on the stage.

But this is not the case. In the period, there were in fact numerous children's or "juvenile companies" made up entirely of boys from age 10 to 14 with the occasional 6 or 7-year-old (Whitmore 96). Plays like John Lyly's *Mother Bombie* (perf. 1590) and *Love's Metamorphosis* (perf. 1590) and other plays written specifically for children's companies were a well-known part of English theatrical culture. They even provoked jesting references from playwrights. In *Hamlet* (c. 1599-1602), for example, several lines were added to the exchange between the Danish prince and Rosencrantz where they are determining on which company they will employ for their play that will cause Claudius to betray himself. Hamlet asks if the troop he saw on his last visit are still in business, to which Rosencrantz replies in the affirmative, but adds that there is a group of child actors that are "now the fashion" (2.2.292.5). After a brief discussion on the children's welfare, Hamlet asks, "Do the boys carry [the victory] away?" to which Rosencrantz replies, "Ay, that they do, my lord, Hercules and/ his load too" (2.2.292.24-6).

Furthermore, the use of children in the theater was not limited to all-children productions. Instead, their roles were "pervasive and diverse" (Mumjee 715). Shehzana Mumjee describes how they were used in "drama and pageantry, not only as players, but also as choirboys, musicians, expositors, orators and decoratively in non-speaking costumed roles" (715). Given the existence of exclusive troops for children, the plays written specifically for them, the troops' apparent success, and the variety in the roles child actors played in the theater in general, the lack of child actors cannot explain why playwrights neglected roles for children. Indeed, these facts seem to underscore their absence. If a child of ten could play an adult, why not write a part for him to play a child of ten?

Another possible explanation for the absence is that the society was going through a period of change, including the roles of children, and therefore playwrights did not know how to

portray them. The belief that childhood was not recognized as a distinct stage of life is accredited to Phillipe Ariès, a scholar in the 1960s. Looking at medieval and early modern paintings and instructional pamphlets, Ariès noted that children are depicted as adults “reduced to a smaller scale [...], without any other difference in expression or features” (33). He thus influentially concluded that children were viewed as miniature adults and that “there was no place for childhood in the medieval world” (33). He goes on to explain that “the discovery of childhood began in the thirteenth century...But the evidence of its development became more plentiful and significant from the end of the sixteenth and throughout the seventeenth” (47). Specifically, he suggests that the rise of children in childish clothing and domestic settings in portraits (as opposed to more adult settings and attire) signals the beginning of a distinction between childhood and adulthood in the early modern period. Where children had formerly taken part in the same activities and conversations, overseen their own education, they began to be denied access as adults became more selective in what was deemed “appropriate” for tender young minds. Parents became more invested in their children’s education and childhood itself became a protected stage of development.

For a long time, Ariès’ research dominated the critical consensus about children in the middle ages and into Shakespeare’s time, and there is a basis for his claims. Portraits of the period rarely represented children in a nursery, dressed in baby clothes and surrounded by toys. As recent scholars have shown, however, these portraits do not reflect the daily experiences of children within their families. Colin Heywood argues that “there [was] no one ‘turning point’” in the history of children that fundamentally altered how adults perceived them, and “those who claim to have identified one seek to ‘dramatize the significance of their findings’” (30). Addressing the common belief that children were perceived as “little adults,” Heywood states

that children “were expected to grow up fast,” but not to the extent of being treated as “miniature adults” (37). Linda Pollock criticizes Ariès’ and other early historians of childhood for “a myth brought about by over-hasty reading, a burning desire to find material to support the thesis and a willful misinterpretation of evidence” (271). She believes that Ariès and his followers’ use of secondary sources like art and instructional pamphlets led to the misguided hypothesis (23). Her own study of primary materials, namely diaries and autobiographies written in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, reveals that there were minor differences in the up-bringing of children and their role within the family, but children then were treated in much the same way as they are today. A father wrote about “solv[ing] his son’s problems at school,” a mother recorded that she had left a babysitter for her three-year-old child, and other parents noted that they had “nursed their children through illness” (98). Ariès, in other words, does not acknowledge the difference between art and life. The portraits, like any other form of art, are themselves a construction subject to generic conventions and social trends, and therefore cannot be taken as faithful representations of reality to the extent that Ariès suggests.

Paula Fass stated that one of Ariès’ main problems was that he disregarded “the subtle, historically situated distinctions” made by “class, gender, and religion” (10). In the introduction to *The Routledge History of Childhood in the Western World* (2013), a recent survey of the critical work done on children, she claims that childhood as “a realm of protected development, an extended time of leisured maturation...has historically been enjoyed by few” because it “has always been a privilege, reserved for the well-to-do and well-placed” (12). She argues that childhood as “an ideal of prolonged development” was not the norm for most of the western world until the twentieth century (11-12). Her findings, in other words, suggest that Ariès’ argument was not completely incorrect, just that it needed to be qualified. Childhood as a period

of development did look different than the modern equivalent and was shorter (boys became “adults” at 14 years, girls at 12 (Witmore 32)), especially for the less privileged in society; nevertheless, there was a persistent and fairly stable notion of childhood as a period of development, even for lower class children, that could have been represented on the early modern stage but was not.

That said, a prominent question concerning children’s independence and free will was prevalent in society during the period. Claire Busse, in an article dealing with the tradition of “commodifying children,” terms the cultural struggle as “the clash of what were considered traditional definitions of children as parental property with emerging conceptions of individual’s moral agency and independent choice” (212). Through inheritance laws, marriage contracts and apprenticeships, parents were able to map out their children’s lives with complete discretion, and they often did so in a way that was financially beneficial. Consequently, children were often compared to assets as parents “invested” in them through education and expected a “return” from that investment in the form of care in their own age as well as an increase in the family’s honor and wealth. However, Renaissance society was beginning to question whether children should be extended individual rights.

Before explaining the conflict further, it is necessary to establish the extent to which commodification was a part of Renaissance society. Busse argues that contemporary laws encouraged parents and other adults to consider children as assets. Orphans from the upper classes were often traded amongst wealthy guardians for the money provided them by the Royal Court of Wards (215-16), and parents could be legally punished for removing their child from an apprenticeship (218). Looking at apprenticeships within the theater, Shehzana Mamujee argues that the performing boys were considered “object[s] of exchange between [their] parents and the

choirmaster” (716). The comparison of bastards to counterfeit money that Michael Neill makes demonstrates the patriarchy’s support of commodification, and Edward Geisweidt asserts that one reason illegitimate children were so mistreated is because they were considered to be a drain on the family’s resources. They could not “legitimate [their father’s] standing as the husband and head of household,” a child’s one responsibility that imbued them with social capital, and were therefore seen as the amount of money they cost their family (126). While the laws themselves were mostly likely meant to protect children by emphasizing their value, scholars agree that the laws instead encouraged parents to treat their offspring like any other commodity.

Most of the above critics who address the trend of commodification do so in terms of disenfranchised groups (orphans, lower- and middle-class children in the labor force, and bastards); however, Orlin, Busse and John Sommerville all point out that even aristocratic children faced the threat of commodification when it came to the question of marriage. While children had to legally consent to be married, the choice of a partner was often not solely theirs to make. Looking at various treatises, Orlin, Busse and Sommerville argue that there was an undeniable connection between marriage arrangements and monetary considerations. The authors of the diaries Pollock studies support those findings, stating that while “none of these writers was forced to marry someone they disliked or stay in work they hated, many recalled that their parents did arrange such matters for them and would have preferred their offspring to have agreed with their choices” (266). All classes, therefore, would have had a vested interest the debate over children’s rights, especially where they diverged from parental rights.

These scholars tend to explain the tension between parental rights and children’s free will outside of the institution of the family because, as Busse explains, “[T]he family was a space where discussions of parental concern and affection often obfuscated the pecuniary issues”

(215). It is only outside of the family, Margaret Pelling agrees, that we can take accurate stock of “the child as an individual in his or her own right” (136). Nevertheless, I would like to take a moment to address the impact religion had on the parent-child relationship since England was a deeply religious nation. John Sommerville argues that the spiritual reformation, which took place only 70 years earlier, had the largest impact on family life in the early modern period because Martin Luther and his followers saw the family as the “real school of character.” In other words, Luther wanted parents to be more involved in their children’s lives, taking it upon themselves to teach them to be good people (101). The shift to family-centered learning may have increased the bonds between parents and their children, making it more likely that parents would listen to their children’s wishes for their future.

Religion, however, had to compete with widely accepted beliefs about women and bastards – the former being a group that could potentially disrupt the commodification of children, and the latter being a group who would benefit the most from a change in society’s beliefs and practices. Both of these groups, however, also posed the greatest threat to the patriarchal structure, so despite the church’s stance that the parent-child relationship was divinely appointed, the connection between mothers and their children was complicated by the competing views. Paige Reynolds, Berit Åström and Betty Travitsky focus on mothers through their relationship with infants, ultimately concluding that most of the evidence from pamphlets, histories and contemporary news that discussed motherhood expressed uneasiness about women’s influence on children. Paige Reynolds directly addresses the sin/sacredness conflict surrounding childbirth, stating that religious pamphlets frame the pain of childbirth as the “consequence of Eve’s sin,” thereby undermining a mother’s moral influence over her children (31). Åström argues that “the mother’s body [was]...regarded as a potential danger” to the

child's health, particularly through breastmilk (577). Travitsky's study of fictional and non-fictional narratives about child murder agrees that these stories tend to "reveal strong fear and hostility towards women, whatever their social class" (63). These anxieties about women's bodies diminished mothers' roles in their children's lives, while increasing the authority fathers had.

Illegitimate children were likewise devalued because they were supposed to have lacked heavenly assistance in their conception (Geisweidt 125). Neill's discussion of bastards synchronizes their disgrace with the negative view of mothers, pointing out that one of the reasons illegitimate children were so offensive is that they "could only be defined as its mother's son" (398), and therefore were "stamped" by their mother's corrupt character of which they were living evidence (408). Because they were proof of their mothers' sins, bastards themselves were considered to be "further from God," "closer to nature and less human," and therefore deserved less consideration than their legitimate counterparts (Geisweidt 125). By dehumanizing bastards to lessen their claims to individual's rights, and undermining the relationship between mothers and their children, society reinforced that notion that children exist to reinforce the patriarchal structure and are thus social assets.

Since the "clash" between parental property and individual freedom could not be resolved by an appeal to religion due to competing societal narratives, it is explored in Renaissance drama. In fact, it is dramatized in a wide variety of plays, testifying to the society's interest in the debate. We can see this clash in *The Jew of Malta* (c. 1590) and *The Merchant of Venice* (c.1600) where daughters wrestle with unconditionally obedience to their fathers (understanding themselves as their father's property) and their own view of what is right (a sense of themselves as people). *The Taming of the Shrew* (1592), *The Woman's Prize* (c.1611), and *Romeo and Juliet*

(c.1595) all have to do with sons and daughters dealing with their parents who want to make marital decisions for them. The *Henry IV* (c. 1597-8) plays present a son strategically defying his father's expectations of princely behavior in order to become king on his own terms. While these are only a few examples of the wide array of early modern dramas, they are representative of the whole in that they all deal with children struggling to assert their independence from their parents for various purposes. Importantly, however, all of them pursue the theme through post-pubescent parent-child relationships. None of these plays deal with an actual child.

*The Revenger's Tragedy*, credited to Thomas Middleton, is another such play that represents the debate in the character of Spurio, the bastard son of the Duke. In the second scene of the first act, Spurio announces to the audience his intention of submitting to his step-mother's sexual advances as a way of revenging his father for his illegitimate existence. He reasons that his "revenge is just" because "a bastard by nature should make cuckolds,/ Because he is the son of a cuckold-maker" (1.2.191; 203-4). Spurio, instead of distancing his actions from his parents, defines himself completely by their choice. Micheal Neill explains that the logic behind Spurio's argument was common in Renaissance society. Working through a monetary comparison, he explains that children were considered to be "patriarchal mint" (406), thought to be "stamped" by their fathers just as coins were stamped with the king's image (men, after all, were thought to be kings within their own households (Orlin 61)). Spurio chose to embrace, rather than break free, of the connection he and everyone around him despised. Despite his profession of being of "an uncertain man, of more/ uncertain woman," not knowing for certain whether his father was the duke or some "groom o'the'stable," Spurio shapes his whole character based on the past lascivious actions of his father (1.2.136-8).

Spurio exemplifies the debate about whether children should be considered their parents' property because even though his actions seem to be in direct opposition to his father's wishes, he demonstrates what a child who is literally "stamped" by their parents would be. Obedience would not come more naturally, as the parents would have their children think. Instead, children would become copies of their parents, behaving not as the parents want them to behave, but as the parents themselves behave. This argument presents a problem in a society that believed that all members of a domicile should be unfailingly obedient to the head of the household. Hiewon Shin explains that obedience was preached as the all-important quality for wives, children and servants, even in extreme cases of domestic abuse. When immoral fathers demand the death of their children, for example, third parties, often servants, were encouraged to step in to save the young ones so that the mother could maintain complete obedience to her husband (Shin 673). Children who were "stamped" in their father's image, however, would not obey, but rather mirror the actions of the father and chaos would be inevitable. The repeated appearance of the question of children as commodity within the plays attests to the cultural pervasiveness of the question, adding yet another curious factor that should have encouraged playwrights to explore the role of children, yet did not.

### **Criticism on Children in Renaissance Literature**

To ask why children are neglected in Renaissance drama is not to say that they have never been discussed by critics. Patriarchy, as the dominant theme in the criticism of children in the Renaissance, offers scholars a way to explain the relationships not only between fathers and their children, but between children and the rest of the household in early modern plays. Hiewon Shin,

Lena Orlin and Michael Neill base their diverse arguments on the early modern ideology that the head of the household was the “king” of that household, and his wife, servants and children were subject to him (Orlin 61). Shin’s article, for example, directly confronts the consequences of the conflicted nature of motherhood caused by the patriarchal structure. “[P]atriarchy,” she argues, “fostered such maternal compliance by giving a non-biological bond (marriage) priority over a biological bond (motherhood)” (667). Religious instruction in particular stressed the importance of wifely obedience “even in extreme cases of violence and mental illness on the parts of the husbands” (673). Rather than inspiring women to change, Shin believes these narratives were directed toward servants, who could step in as the child’s protector without committing as great an offense against the patriarchal structure as a wife (675). Shin’s interest in children, as with Orlin and Neill, only concerns the problems they cause for their parents who struggle to uphold the patriarchy and fail for one reason or another.

While many scholars who discuss patriarchy take the time to acknowledge children, even if it is only in passing, there is also a trend among scholars to ignore children when they’re discussing matters of the family, much like the early modern playwrights. In two different articles by Lena Orlin and Garrett Sullivan that discuss the importance of effective patriarchy, children are mentioned only as a part of the larger household. Examining reasons behind the collapse of the domestic structure in the anonymous *Arden of Faversham* (c. 1592), Orlin and Sullivan establish the similarity between the roles of husband and king. As the head of the household, men have the duty (privilege) to rule over their wives, children and servants in that order (Orlin 64). Husbands, wives and servants are all discussed in depth in these articles (reflecting the play’s interest in the interaction between those groups), but children are markedly absent from the discussion. Sullivan also glosses over them, even when he quotes a line from the

play wherein Alice promises to give her lover the wealth that should “make [Arden and her] children rich” (1.220-23). Despite the focus his article places on Alice’s moral corruption, Sullivan skips over her failings as a mother in order to return to her crimes against her husband. Shin’s article on child abuse and Travitsky’s on child murder are likewise silent about children, focusing solely on the parents. Despite the fact that so many articles revolve around the family, there is a trend in the scholarship of early modern dramas to gloss over children in favor of the adult members of the family. By so doing, they reinforce the notion that children were considered to be objects, not to act but to be acted upon by others.

Two scholars, Ann Blake and Catherine Belsey, both focus specifically on the functions children have in Shakespearean dramas, arguing that there are a “large number of parts” (30 by Blake’s count (293), 45 by Mark Lawhorn (233)). Blake points out that Shakespeare invented many of these parts and argues that children serve to enhance the theatrical impact of history and tragedy plays (304). She goes on to list five roles children play in tragedies and histories: to present a normal parental interaction that will help clarify the adult’s character, to personify complete innocence, including sexual innocence that is contrasted with adults’ experience, to present an opportunity for otherwise unlikable (adult) characters to gain sympathy, to enact the carefree perspective that adults cannot achieve, and to enhance the audience’s horror and outrage against specific characters or murder and war in general (300-304). Belsey focuses specifically on the children in history plays, but disagrees with Blake’s assertion that Shakespeare’s children “[present]...*varied* childhood behavior,” arguing, “These little victims are not much differentiated from one another” (37). Despite the benefit discussions of children receive from these two scholars, neither Blake nor Belsey define what a child is. Lawhorn, who likewise neglects to explain what he includes in his count of children, explains that the children’s ages

were not clearly defined in their respective plays so that it wasn't as difficult to find an actor to fit the part (233). These scholars include characters in their discussions like the Boy in *Henry V* and Young Lucius in *Titus Andronicus* who are not yet adults but are not small children either, which increases their numbers significantly. Furthermore, none of these three critics compare the number of plays with a child and those without, and Belsey relies on a similar reasoning as Ariès – that is, examining pictures for representations of childhood and, finding them absent, concluding that childhood “was barely visible until well into the seventeenth century as a distinctive state of being” (33) – to explain why there are not more child characters.

One scholar, however, has specifically focused on exploring the function and reception of pre-pubescent characters and performers in Renaissance England. Michael Witmore argues that the recent Protestant reformation highlighted the danger of performance without understanding (a jab at Catholic prayer recitation), and children were the ideal group to symbolically represent that danger. Children in early modern plays are often defined by their lack of certain traits, like sexual innocence or the ability to predict (or indifference to) the future, and are therefore often contrasted with other groups like adults, animals, and angels (26). Although playwrights exploited this to ironic effect, children often told inconvenient truths through irony about identity, social conventions and theatrical practices. As to the latter, Witmore argues that child characters' lack of knowledge about their futures highlights the audience's superior knowledge of generic conventions and emphasizes genres' constructedness (103). It is this focus on meta-theatrics – theater that comments not only on its own conventions and strategies, but on rhetoric and public performance in general – that provided the main gateway for children to enter into early modern drama.

## Children and Genre in Renaissance Drama

This thesis argues, then, that the reason behind children's exclusion lies in the core themes and purposes of the three dramatic genres of Tragedy, Comedy, and History (I'm excluding Romance for the reasons explained above). I will focus on these three major genres because they were overwhelmingly utilized by the playwrights of the Renaissance and are still used to categorize the plays today.

In order to fully understand the influence generic conventions had on child characters, we must first understand a little more about genre. Lawrence Danson argues that genres do not exist as "unchanging essences but as sets of loose similarities among artworks widely separated in their historical and cultural assumptions" (4). Genres today, for example, look very different than what they were in the early modern period because they change in response to their audience's frame of reference as well as their needs and desires. Rosalie Colie, for example, connects "topic and treatment with the literary system, but also [...] the literary kinds with *kinds* of knowledge and experience" (26). Despite the broad connections that seem to hold genres together, scholars have identified the core elements that identify a genre as such. John Frow proposes that genres are made up of three pieces: the formal organization (setting, time, space, grammar, etc.), rhetorical structure (emotional tone, credibility, authority), and thematic content (74-6). The latter element guides the types of discourse a genre draws upon, including the types of actions and, more importantly for our purposes, the types of actors. These actors, he clarifies, "will be recognisable characters [...] belonging to the genre's more or less limited repertoire of character-types." He goes on to say that these two categories, actors and actions, work together to "form a world with a particular organisation of space and time and a particular mode of plausibility [...].

Represented worlds are always, and by definition, generically specific” (76). Children, it would seem, were not part of any of the main genres’ “repertoires.”

But how defined were these genres in the early modern period? Colie argues that “literary invention...in the Renaissance was largely generic” (17), but genres were in a state of flux during the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Shakespeare’s character Polonius, for example, lists a number of variations on the three major genres: “tragedy,/ comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical,/ historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-/ comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable, or/ poem unlimited” (*Hamlet* 2.2.398-402). Despite Colie’s acknowledgement that “it was not entirely obvious in the Renaissance what the genres of literature surely were, nor yet how to identify them” (8-9), she also exclaims about “how solid and reliable this indefinable system could be” (22). These systems of genre could contain a wide range of topics and characters, but critics agree that there were only three major types of genres in the early modern period: Comedy, Tragedy and History. Danson argues that the title page to the First Folio, which titles itself *Mr. William Shakespeare’s Comedies, Histories and Tragedies*, reinforces Shakespeare’s and his editors’ “allegiance” to the concept of genre (8). Romance, he adds, was created in the nineteenth century by critics, but he believes that separating these plays into their own category “obscure[s] the ways in which the last plays are examples of Shakespeare’s continual experimentation, his variation, revision, and subversion of his own and his contemporaries’ idea of generic practice” (13). Although genres continually changed as playwrights experimented with various themes to keep their works fresh and exciting, History, Tragedy and Comedy had enough definitive forms, settings, time frames, character rosters, etc. that identified a play as one or the other. None of these genres, however, encouraged the use of children.

I will argue that children do not fit into any of the three genres and are therefore largely silenced. My chapters each focus on one popular play from a different genre. The plays for Comedy and Tragedy are both set in domestic spaces that emphasizes familial relationships – that is, in a space where you would expect to find children but often do not. Since History plays rarely take place in a domestic setting, I chose one instead that places a child at the center of the plot. All three plays that I will examine are anomalies of Renaissance drama because they use actual children on stage. Studying these exceptions allows me to determine the functions children perform within these plays that would not work in other plays of the same genre. Each chapter will discuss in depth its play's generic situation, starting with Comedy, followed by Tragedy and concluding with History, and will explain why introducing a child into that situation generally does not happen.

Chapter One will focus on Comedy using Thomas Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613). Comedy, as the genre least likely to include children because its plots always end with a wedding, is the ideal place to begin. Middleton's play, as an exception, challenges the conventions of the genre and demonstrates why children were not widely used in it. Comedies end predictably in the establishment or reinforcement of a society. Katherine Eisaman Maus states that Renaissance English comedies follow a fairly regulated pattern full of "stock characters" and "stock situations" (123) ending in at least one marriage. Importantly, she says that Comedy is concerned with "rebelliousness" as a "phase of life" (124). Since the "phase" that comedies are concerned with is the period right before marriage, children simply do not fit, coming only after the play has concluded. Middleton's play uses children to question the conventional endings used in Comedy as well as the norms associated with families that Comedies perpetuate. In the play, Sir Walter Whorehound and Touchwood Senior come face to

face with their young bastard children, who only appear in three brief scenes. Touchwood Senior expresses immediate revulsion and orders that his child be taken away. Sir Walter treats his own illegitimate children and his mistress like a family by providing for them, planning to do so even after his anticipated marriage to a different woman. Both men are literally confronted with their failure to conform to the “normal” family model and cannot or do not want to change. As this example shows, the establishment/reinforcement at the end of a comedy would be put into jeopardy by the presence of children. Bastards especially do not fit into the schema of a comedy because they do not fit within the traditional family unit, so although they often appear in tragedies as adults, they rarely appear in comedies at all.

Following the chapter on Comedy is one on its dark twin, Tragedy. Destroying families and bloodlines where Comedy builds them, tragedy complements the first chapter by demonstrating that despite the differences in generic plots, children are still unwelcome. Chapter Two will discuss *The Duchess of Malfi* (1612), a tragedy set almost exclusively within a domestic space. John Webster’s *Duchess* typifies the genre, complete with nine deaths that include the two young children of the Duchess and Antonio, leaving only their eldest son to pick up the pieces of the now-desolate society. Children play a vital role in this tragedy, as the physical proof of their mother’s humanity, including her sexuality, yet they are kept in the shadows for two different reasons. The first reason involves the audience’s reaction. Stephen Greenblatt argues that tragedies are “the artistic form that has grappled strenuously with the most excruciatingly difficult, intractable elements of human experience” (957). Adding children into the genre would increase the tragedy to a Jacobean-type level, a carnival-esque parade of emotion because of the audience’s empathy with any child characters. The other reason, however, has to do with the genre’s purpose. Danson states that an individual’s will in Tragedy

brings about the destruction of an entire society or household (139), which does happen in this play. The Duchess' decision to marry her steward undoubtedly precipitated her and her family's deaths, but her legacy does not completely die with her. Her eldest child is brought on stage at the end of the production to symbolize the possible reconstruction of the society and the endurance of the Duchess' will, but this hope he brings ultimately subverts the genre's prescribed ending, which does not allow for hope of any kind. Children in tragedies, then, would either distress the audience too much or else contradict the very essence by reaffirming the tragic hero's will and hopefully looking toward a better future.

History plays round out the discussion of generic conventions because the genre combines elements of both comedies and tragedies. Marriages do occasionally conclude histories, as in *Henry V* (c. 1596-9), but they can also include the needless deaths of innocents, as with the little princes in *Richard III* who are killed offstage (c. 1592). As a genre that combines elements of comedy and tragedy, history draws on the discussions of the previous chapters and demonstrates that even the middle ground between the other genres proves to be an inhospitable place for children.

Chapter Three will discuss Shakespeare's *King John* (1596) in its conversation with History plays. Histories focuses on "civil and foreign wars, political intrigue, and the rise and fall of kings" (Howard 615). Naturally, children would have no agency in such a setting and would therefore only be good as pawns for others to manipulate, like they are in Tragedies. *King John* is one of the few History plays with a child in it, and it indeed uses Arthur as just such a pawn. The play opens with an announcement that France is challenging John's right to the English throne, using Arthur as the challenger. King John orders his assassination, which he escapes because of his young age, but shortly after dies jumping off the castle wall. The death at first

appears to be a pivotal moment in the play, causing the English lords to abandon John's army in favor of Louis's French army. The moment is ultimately undercut by a rumor that Louis will kill the lords after his victory, causing the lords to return to the English ruler. The easily swayed nature of the lords' allegiance powerfully testifies of the insignificance of a child's life, or death, within the political realm. This play also has an adult character called the Bastard who will also be discussed in the chapter. Since History plays usually revolve around such political and military scenes, *King John* provides a clear example of the reason children were excluded from this group of plays.

These summaries may sound simplistic, but they are to be read against the larger background of the introduction and will be developed significantly in the following chapters. And it is to the first chapter, on Comedy, that we now turn.

## **Chapter 1: Out of Wedlock: Children and Comedy in Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside***

In English Renaissance comedies, families are routinely tested as parents attempt to control their children and children struggle to gain independence. Yet audiences know that at the end of comedies, all will end in the establishment of a new family in a wedding. Katherine Maus states that while other genres focus on the political sphere, “comedy is concerned with domestic life and the relations among family members and neighbors” (126). Within that sphere, the parent-child relationship is one of the most explored, yet as we have already heard in the introduction, there are very few actual children present on the stage. Indeed, in comedy, adults dominate the stage as they decide either who they or their children should marry. Despite comedy’s focus on the domestic sphere and its drive towards marriage and sanctioned sexuality, the genre that seems most hospitable to children almost entirely excludes them. The reason for this exclusion is generic, and this point can be understood if we examine an important exception to the rule of children’s exclusion in comedy: Thomas Middleton’s *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*.

### **The Comedy Play**

In order to discuss possible explanations for this childless phenomenon in comedy, we must first discuss what comedy is. As John Frow states, genres create worlds that are “populated by specific players...and infused with a moral ethos which brings with it certain attitudes to these players” (7). What then defines the world, and the attitudes, of Renaissance comedy?

When attempting to define Renaissance comedy, contemporary scholars such as Rosalie Colie, Ann Imbrie, Arthur Marotti, and Katherine Maus cite early modern theorists (mainly Ben

Jonson and Sir Philip Sidney), who argue that Elizabethan playwrights largely followed the genres defined by Aristotle and the poet Horace. According to Aristotle, comedy most likely arose from an agricultural tradition called the *phallaka* wherein young men paraded a large model phallus through the streets while singing bawdy songs in celebration of a bounteous harvest (Maus 121). While Middleton, Dekker, Shakespeare and their contemporaries avoided the physical symbol of the ancient rite, the topics of their comedies do revolve around the themes of “rebirth and renewal” and “festivities in which sexuality and fertility are celebrated, inhibitions loosened, bodily pleasures indulged, bounds of decorum overturned” (Maus 121). Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (c. 1594-96), for example, portrays the Athenians’ romantic relationships, albeit brought about by magic, as entirely based on sexual desire. It further crosses the normal boundaries of sexuality when Titania is bewitched into falling in love with an ass.

Even as comedies celebrate sexuality, however, the genre also seeks to control it. John Fletcher’s *The Woman’s Prize* or *The Tamer Tamed* (c. 1611), for instance, features a group of women who refuse to have sex with their husbands until the men agree to treat them like equals. In spite of the restrictions imposed by the women, the entire play is riddled with sexual innuendo, and it ultimately celebrates at the end when Maria, the “tamer’s” wife, vows to “dedicate [her life] in service to [her husband’s] pleasure” (5.4.57). Comedies do, then, celebrate sexuality, but they do so within certain boundaries, notably the bounds of marriage.

Comedy can also be defined in terms of what it should and should not include. Critics tend to agree that for Shakespeare and his contemporaries, comedies were plays that “end in

marriage or the promise of marriage”<sup>1</sup>. Critics Maus and Lawrence Danson agree that one of the major differences between comedies and the other genres is its exclusion of death (Maus 124; Danson 60), but Sir Philip Sidney, a Renaissance theorist, argues specifically about the types of characters that should be part of a comedy. He agrees with Aristotle that comedy should deal with members of the middle and lower classes. In fact, Sidney criticizes Shakespeare for “mingl[ing] kings and clowns” and “thrust[ing] in clowns by head and shoulders, to play part in majestical matters, with neither decency nor discretion” (199). For that reason, comedies center around domestic issues, whether it be between spouses, parent and offspring (mostly adults), master and servant, etc. It is notable in terms of this thesis that neither Sidney, nor any other theorist, comments on the inclusion or exclusion of children in their catalogue of what belongs in a comedy and what does not, and yet playwrights, almost as one, choose to leave them out.

Given the influence generic structures, conventions, and expectations had on what was and was not included in comedic plays, it is important to investigate when, how, and why those boundaries are breached. Looking at one of the foundational conventions of the genre, Frances Dolan argues that marriages in early modern comedies are often not as one-dimensional as they seem. She asserts that playwrights used the stage to explore various possibilities for the function and meaning of marriage (621), such as a blurred distinction between the wifely and husbandly duties (*As You like It*), what equality and/or friendship might mean in a marriage (*Much Ado*), the struggle for dominance (*Shrew*; *Midsummer*), sexual possibilities inside and outside of marriage (*Merry Wives*). Though she looks specifically at Shakespeare’s repertoire, she also finds the same kind of exploration in dramas from other playwrights, like John Fletcher (*The Woman’s*

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<sup>1</sup> Two exceptions are Johnson’s *Epicoene*, which concludes in an annulment, and Shakespeare’s *Love’s Labor’s Lost*, which ends in the separation of the lovers.

*Prize or The Tamer Tamed*) and Thomas Heywood (*The English Traveller*). As Dolan's discussion reveals, even the most defining plot point of a genre can be toyed with, either to "explore various possibilities" as Dolan argues, to reflect society's attitudes, or, as Stott argues, as a way for playwrights to stand out from their contemporaries. In the end, Dolan's work reinforces the idea that marriage is part of the comedic genre, both in terms of structure and content, but playwrights nevertheless played with this generic expectation, exploring marriage from multiple angles. But while playwrights played with one generic expectation (marriage), they rarely defied expectation by including those characters strangely absent from the genre, children.

### ***A Chaste Maid as a Comedy***

Thomas Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613) is one play that did defy generic conventions by including many children, and exploring this play can help us to understand what why children are for the most part excluded from the genre. Using four distinct plot lines with no central story line, the play subverts many comedic conventions. Moreover, children play a necessary role in all these plot lines except for the main one, which deals with the generic marriage plot.

The play is complicated and a summary might be helpful. The curtain opens with what Emma Smith calls a "brilliantly filthy scene" that is underscored with sexual innuendo from the first line. Maudlin Yellowhammer asks her marriage-age daughter, Moll, if she has "played over all [her] lessons o' the virginals" (1.1.1). A virginal is literally a harpsichord, but the line has a *double entendre*, and the mother is essentially asking her daughter if she has lost her virginity

yet. Moll, who answers that she is still a virgin, is thus introduced as the curiously chaste maid in Cheapside. Maudlin and her husband wish to marry Moll off to a Sir Walter Whorehound, an aristocratic gentleman, and to marry their scholarly son, Tim, to Sir Walter's supposed niece (she's actually one of Sir Walter's sexual partners). Unlike her brother, Moll will not succumb to the arranged marriage easily and attempts to run away with Touchwood Jr. They are caught by the Yellowhammers, prompting Touchwood and Sir Walter to duel. As a representative of the traditionally comedic marriage plot, this story line demonstrates why children were not generally used in this genre. The lovers had not yet married, which, in this conservative genre, meant that they had not yet consummated their relationship, so children would only come after the marriage and the end of the play.

Not all the characters in this story, however, are as traditionally conservative as Moll and Touchwood Jr. One example is the obviously randy Sir Walter Whorehound, who serves as a link between the four plot lines. He is involved in a long-standing sexual triangle with Mr. and Mrs. Allwit. He supports them and their household financially in exchange for a sexual relationship with Mrs. Allwit while Mr. Allwit plays the willing cuckold. Sir Walter and Mrs. Allwit have had at least three children together (some productions use up to seven), all of whom appear onstage. One of them is even born during the course of the play. Allwit learns that Sir Walter plans to marry, and, concerned that he might lose the easy lifestyle he has traded his wife's fidelity for, plots to overthrow the marriage. The newborn especially moves this plot along by providing an excuse for the women characters to gather in celebration of the newborn and giving Allwit more incentive to break up Sir Walter's impending marriage because he does not want to provide for the children himself.

In a similar moment of financial concern brought on by children, a man named Touchwood Sr. (the aforementioned Touchwood Jr.'s brother) leaves his wife, telling her that they must separate for a while in order to avoid having more children that they cannot afford. As soon as they part, Touchwood reveals that he does not completely give up his sexual activity during these separations, and he is immediately confronted by a woman and her child that he had fathered on one of his previous "royal tours." He pays off the woman, who later tricks some promoters (or informers) into taking the illegitimate child off her hands.

In a final plot line, the lack of a child in the case of an upper-class couple, however, causes just as much trouble as the excess of children in the lower classes. The Kixes have been unable to conceive a child in their seven years of marriage, and they constantly fight over who is to blame (which actually produces some of the play's funniest puns)<sup>2</sup>. Touchwood Sr. offers them a cure for their barrenness. In exchange for what Emma Smith calls a "huge" amount of money ("A *Chaste Maid*" 0:15:25), Touchwood presents Lord Kix with a vial of almond milk, but an altogether different kind of medicine for Lady Kix (wink, wink), whose medicine "must be taken lying [down]" (3.3.168). The almond milk is just a placebo and the real cure is for Touchwood to impregnate Lady Kix himself. Her "medicine" works and yet another illegitimate child is conceived. Sir Walter, who stood to inherit from the Kixes, receives the news as he lies on what he thinks is his death bed (injured by the duel with Touchwood Jr.), and is immediately abandoned by the Allwit family, who realize that he will no longer be able to support them. Fulfilling the one necessary convention of comedy, the play concludes with the marriage of Moll

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Lady Kix asks her husband, "Can any woman have a greater cut?" He answers, "I know 'tis great, but what of that, wife?/ I cannot do withal" (2.1.138-40). On the surface, they are talking about the lady's bruised pride on account of her childlessness, but "cut" also refers to a vagina, which Sir Oliver says he cannot do anything with despite its size.

and Touchwood Jr. Given the play's conformity to generic conventions in the main plot, why are there so many children in this play?

When critics talk about this play, they usually focus on the unapologetic materiality of Cheapside. Focusing on gender, Rick Bowers argues that women's bodies are marketed by an unsympathetic patriarchy: "[A]ny birth signals introduction to an amoral, but nonetheless social and comical game" ("Comedy"). Emma Smith remarks,

Sex here is commercialized within and across marriage rather than outside it. We might expect a play preoccupied with the relationship between sex and money to feature bawds and whores...Here though, in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, they're nowhere to be seen, perhaps because their role is completely usurped by women within the marriage market and the economics of that market (0:21:24)

Building from these critics, Liberty Stanavage claims that men are also assigned a value depending on their ability to father children (Lady Kix, for example, questions her husband's manhood because of their childlessness). Sabine Schülting and Paige Reynolds argue that the commercial atmosphere penetrates to even the most sacred spaces, like the lying-in chamber (where women gave birth). Andrew Stott explains that with so much overt commercializing happening throughout the play, what is actually emphasized is what the characters lack. He states, "The idea of literal possession being deferred is central to *A Chaste Maid*, displaced into an arena of imminent fecundity, a deal that is yet to come, a pregnancy that is yet to be delivered, a marriage that is yet to be brokered, and another that is yet to bear fruit" (125). Most of these critics do address the presence of children in this play, but they do so to provide yet another instance of how the materialistic society has spread to everyone and everything, including

children. They do not, however, explore the very weirdness of the presence of children in this comedy.

### **Children in *A Chaste Maid***

To understand why children do appear in this comedy, it is important to understand just how much the play, outside of its main marriage plot, deviates from conventions of the genre in numerous ways. For not only does this city comedy include at least three children, it subverts many other generic conventions as well.

Emma Smith and Arthur Marotti contend that this play is a meta-comedy, one that comments on the origins of comedy itself, which explains its heavy emphasis on “rebirth and renewal” (Smith 0:6:22). Marotti comments on the play’s free-spirited attitude toward sexuality: *A Chaste Maid* does not condemn the characters’ often deviant eroticism, but punishes crimes “which have a negative, asocial character and which result in the frustration of love and the disruption of families” (67). Maus claims that comedies “empha[size]...traits human beings share, not on those that elevate one person over another” (125), and yet Sir Walter, an aristocratic philanderer, is made into a scapegoat at the end of the comedy in a moment not unlike that of Malvolio or Shylock (although, unlike them, Sir Walter is the ultimate insider). Andrew Stott argues that while comedies generally focus on similarities and finding matches (see also Danson 72), this comedy highlights differences as it aims to “reveal the perceptual distance that exists between a subject’s concept of itself, and the ‘empirical’ reality of that relation” (128). Stott and Smith also note the unusual marriage in the play that is “marked by passion rather than by romance” (Smith 0:20:40; Stott 125). In short, this comedy is highly

unusual for its genre, and therefore provides a situation where children could be used without drawing attention away from the essential plot lines.

To emphasize the impact of the play's generic commentary on children's presence, I return to a description of comedy provided by Katherine Maus. She states that comedies follow a fairly regulated pattern full of "stock characters" and "stock situations" that end in at least one marriage. Importantly, she says that New Comedy (as opposed to the Old Comedy, an earlier Greek genre that focused on famous, real people and current events (123)) is concerned with "rebelliousness" as a "phase of life" (124). Since the "phase" that comedies are concerned with is the period right before marriage, children simply do not fit into that time period, coming only after the play has concluded.

In contrast to other comedies, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* does not present the rebellious aspects of this society as a phase, but rather as the *modus operandum* that will continue even after the play has concluded. These characters enthusiastically subvert the patriarchal structure through taking pride in fathering illegitimate children, complacency towards cuckoldry, and encouraging their children's sexuality, whether or not it is within the bounds of marriage. As Emma Smith, referring to the expected "new society" that is usually established at the end of a comedy, said, "We don't get something new at the end of *Chaste Maid*, but I'm not sure the play thinks we need it" (0:52:49-52). Because of the play's unusual rejection of this generic convention, and indeed many others, children are able to enter the world of the play and perform unique functions that were otherwise unavailable to them within the generic strictures of comedy.

Not only are children not a distraction in this particular play, as they would be in any other comedy, they perform three functions that are crucial to it: they embody a growing concern

about population that Londoners were experiencing in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century; they enhance the themes of materiality and sexuality that were of particular interest to Middleton; and in so doing, help define the adults' characters through their interactions with children.

For early modern theater goers, the children in *A Chaste Maid* would represent their fears about the growing population in London. John Frow and Rosalie Colie argue that genres are grounded in a specific cultural moment, and in this moment, London was experiencing an unprecedented growth rate. As a result of mass in-migration from provincial parts of England as well as other places in Europe, the population increased from 40,000 people in 1500 to 200,000 by 1600 with the majority of the growth occurring in the last half of the century (Howard "City Comedy" 4). Edward Geisweidt points out the strain this would have had on resources, and argues that the illegitimate children, as indeed all the children in this play are, would have represented a "burden of that system." He goes on to explain that legitimate children had positive social values, which I will cover in greater depth in the upcoming discussion on materiality, whereas illegitimate children had a negative value in the eyes of the public, making them an easy target to blame for the scarcity of resources (124).

On both ends of the legitimacy spectrum, Touchwood Sr. claims to have procreated enough times to cause even the most liberal mind to worry about a resource shortage. In the scene where Touchwood Sr. is introduced, he tells his wife, "Our desires/ Are both too fruitful for our barren fortunes," adding, "Some only can get riches and no children;/ We only can get children and no riches (2.1.8-12). Though he enforces a separation from his wife to prevent doing "what may beget beggars" (2.1.40), he does not cease his sexual activities. He brags that the last time he travelled in the country, he "hinder[ed] hay-making," referring to the harvest, by having "no less than seven [women] lay in [give birth]/... Within three weeks of one another's

time” (2.1.61-2). Not only do Touchwood’s legitimate progeny burden him financially, his illegitimate children have a significant impact on the larger economic system by slowing down productivity. By creating a character so steeped in children, Middleton is able to comedically address one of London’s real concerns about the unprecedented growth in population.

I would here like to turn a moment to the final function of children I mentioned, that of defining adults’ characters, in order to explore Touchwood Sr.’s attitude toward his children. Erica Fudge provides a possible explanation for the indifference Touchwood shows when he comes face to face with one of his illegitimate children, presented to him by one of the country wenches he bragged about. Fudge’s article addresses how animals were treated during this period, but her argument resonates with the way Touchwood refuses to acknowledge the child as an individual, instead calling it a “half-yard of flesh” and a “piece of flesh” as he would an animal (2.1.84, 107). Fudge explains that people determine their level of investment based on the animal’s (or person’s) perceived individuality, which is determined by their perceived level of intelligence. Conversely, “Lack of reason means lack of face, means lack of individuality, lack of home, which in turn means that these beings are outside of full ethical consideration.”

Touchwood clearly does not see the child as a child; he sees him or her as an object that does not deserve “ethical consideration” (180). After the wench leaves him, he wonders “what shift she’ll make now with this piece of flesh/ In this strict time of Lent, I cannot imagine” (2.1.107-8). His comment does not even hint at regret or concern over the child’s welfare and instead foreshadows the comparison between the child and the piece of lamb with which it later shares a basket.

In the interest of fairness, we must take into account the effect hyperfertility would have on a man like Touchwood Sr. Since materiality is a major theme in the play, it seems fitting to

compare the situation to the economics of supply and demand. Touchwood is able to, and in fact has produced scores of children. For him, children are in surplus and so his personal “demand” for them has dwindled to none, and he therefore places a much lower value on them (this also partially explains the barren Kixes’ willingness to pay such a high price for a child).

Notwithstanding Touchwood’s reasons for doing so, comparing children to animal meat is not the kind of humor that can be repeated with the same level of success, and is only acceptable in this play because of *A Chaste’s Maid*’s subversion of many other comedic conventions.

As Touchwood’s example demonstrates, children not only represented a drain on resources, but also embodied resources themselves. As the play explicitly treats them as such, it draws attention to the play’s fixation on materiality. Children, as their parents’ property, held the important social position of attesting to their parents’ religious and political standing. Simply by existing, children “secure[d] land and other assets” for themselves and their families, assured the continuation of the patriarchal line, and affirmed to society God’s approval of their parents (Geisweidt 124). The value of children was so great that couples who remained childless were considered jointly “disabled” according to Catherine Belling (81-2), which helps explain the turmoil in the Kixes’ marriage. As the only couple in Cheapside that appears to be unable to reproduce, Sir Oliver and Lady Kix constantly fight over who is to blame for their childless state. At the accusation of her husband, Lady Kix exclaims, “I barren? ‘Twas otherways/ with me when I was at court; I was ne’er called so till I was/ married” (3.3.54-56). In turn she questions his manhood, asking Touchwood Sr. how she could be expected to be friends with “one that’s scarce the hind quarter of a man,” to which her husband replies, “Thou art nothing of a woman” (3.3.92-4). In order to affirm their own gendered identities, the Kixes are willing to pay £1000, what Emma Smith calls a “huge” amount, for “fertility medicine” (0:15:25), thereby placing a

monetary value on the child they long for. At the beginning of the play, Sir Oliver explains that they have already been consulting an apothecary without regard to price (2.1.142), so they have already paid untold amounts to help the conception process along. They are essentially willing to pay anything. Their inability to bear children for so long gave them time to realize the social value children have, leading them to say, despite the culture's emphasis on financial gain, that the £1000 price for a child was indeed a "bargain" (5.4.14). The Kixes then reinforce the theme of materiality by placing a monetary value on something that was not meant to be bought or sold – a child.

The characters' commercialization of children, however, would be less important if the adult characters demonstrated their value outside of the market, specifically on a personal level. Unfortunately, the adult characters who are supposed to care for children are the ones who express the least interest for them as anything other than a source of material gain. The gossips attending the christening celebration (3.2), for example, do not seem interested in the Allwit newborn beyond a few remarks about her size and her future as a mother. Rick Bowers argues that the women in the scene are distorted through the patriarchal lens in which they are interpreted by Allwit (2), but they spend only 17 lines discussing the baby, focusing their attention the rest of the time on taking advantage of the sumptuous feast Allwit (actually Whorehound) has provided. The country wench, who confronts Touchwood Sr. with one of his illegitimate children, accepts a bribe from the irresponsible impregnator to release him from his parental duties (2.1.102). Then, in one of the most pointed references as to the tendency to treat people like marketable meat, she places the child in a basket with a "fat loin of mutton" and leaves it with two promoters who are policing the city for illegal Lentin meat (2.2). The promoters, instead of disparaging the mother for leaving her child, bemoan their own monetary

loss that the child represents. “Half our gettings,” one says, “must run in sugar-sops and nurses’ wages now, besides many a pound of soap and tallow. We have need to get loins of mutton still, to save suet to change for candles” (2.2.201-4). From the children’s own parents to strangers on the street, none of the adults reveal a hidden valuation of children outside of the social and economic benefits (or strain) they provide. Thus are the children of Cheapside defined solely by their social and monetary value, and the adults’ heartless pursuit of material gain is emphasized.

The children are not the only ones defined by the interactions with adults, however. Allwit and Sir Walter’s characters become more complicated through their relationships with their children. Allwit seems to follow the standard established by the other characters, listing off his children along with the other possessions that Sir Walter provides for his family (1.2.19). He silences them when they try to address Sir Walter, calling one “villain” and the other “bastard” (1.2.123, 125), later adding that all children are “pretty foolish things” (2.3.35). Based solely on those interactions, one would think that Allwit did not value his children at all. However, he also calls for the nurse to bring the new baby to him. He compliments her, albeit using a materialistic comparison, declaring that she “looks as if/ she had two thousand pound to her portion and run away/ with a tailor,” and that he “cannot choose/ But buss [kiss] her thrice an hour” (2.2.13-15; 21-2). He even indulges in a little baby talk (28). As to his eldest sons, Allwit is the one to suggest that the “sight of them/ will make him [Sir Walter] cheerful straight[away]” (5.1.55-6). While Allwit is by no means a model father, he does not seem to care that his children are not related to him by blood, and takes pleasure in seeing them anyway, though he pretends not to at first. Even though his comedic display with the baby supports the ridiculousness of his character, his underlying fondness for the children serves to make this character a little more likeable.

Sir Walter, on the other hand, is made less likeable through his interactions with his own children. While he warmly greets the boys when they call to him and asks them about their schoolwork, after they have gone, he immediately asks himself, “How shall I dispose of these two brats...?” (1.2.133). When the children are brought to his sickbed in order to comfort him, Sir Walter sees them only as those who “[stand] between [him] and heaven” (5.1.86). Unlike Allwit, Sir Walter tries to act like he takes pleasure in seeing the children by talking openly to them, volunteering to stand in as a godparent for his daughter and presenting her with a “fair high standing cup/ And two great ‘postle spoons” (3.2.50-1). Except for his material gifts, Sir Walter betrays no concern for his children at all. His true feelings are revealed to the audience in that second scene where he plans to arrange apprenticeships for both of his boys before he is married, but they are later revealed to everyone in Sir Walter’s last scene. Though he saves his harshest words for Mrs. Allwit, wishing that she would die from venereal diseases, he adds a stipulation that she witness the “confusion [destruction] of her brats before her eyes” (5.1.113-4). This final request, officially recorded in his will, overlooks the fact that all of Mrs. Allwit’s children are also his own. If his sin of denouncing his hedonistic lifestyle was not enough to condemn him, this last request certainly did. Thus, Sir Walter’s relationship with his children serves to emphasize his hypocrisy and make the audience agree with his punishment to be sentenced to debtor’s prison.

In addition to emphasizing the materialist theme running throughout the play, children in *A Chaste Maid* also draw attention to the play’s interest, which it shares with other Comedies, in sexuality. As noted earlier, the play is not interested in containing the characters’ sexual desires, but rather exploits them to comedic effect. In fact, Stanavage claims that male sexuality is not only given free reign, but actually constitutes a man’s success when paired with financial

interests (150). It is because of this devil-may-care attitude toward sexuality that, frankly, results in so many illegitimate children. Michael Witmore argues that some Elizabethan playwrights included children in their dramas in order to ironize their innocence, particularly sexual innocence (106). *A Chaste Maid*, however, does not include children making risqué or bawdy comments; instead, children emphasize the theme of sexuality by becoming a living symbol of their parents' sexuality, good or bad.

Because of the play's dismissive attitude toward immorality, characters often openly reference the sexual origins of children. Usually, the connotations reflect well on the parents, as discussed above. Sir Oliver, upon learning that his wife is pregnant, exclaims, "Ho, my wife's quickened! I am a man forever!" (5.3.1). To him, a child means that his sexuality is no longer in question (to him and those who are not privy to the real cure of the Kixes' barrenness). The Allwits child also reaffirms her parents' successful sexuality, and the wet nurse tells Allwit that the girl is "the best piece of work that e'er you did" (2.2.24), clearly referencing his (supposed) part in creating the child. In both cases, adults see children as confirmation of proof of their parents' healthy sexuality.

Illegitimate children, on the other hand, would have cast a negative pall on their parents in Elizabethan England. Talking about Lady Kix, a woman who is unimpeachable in her virtue (as far as we know) until her encounter with Touchwood, Shannon Miller states that the lady's "'blossoming' belly reminds the audience that her virtue is no longer intact" (qtd. Bowers 5). When joined by his children as he lies "dying," Sir Walter, who formerly seemed to enjoy seeing his children, claims that they "[darken] all my hopes/ And [stand] between me and the sight of heaven" (5.1.71-2). Now that he believes himself to be on the point of death, the children no longer please him because they are physical evidence of his sexual sins. In spite of Sir Walter's

deathbed repentance and the real life implications these illegitimate children would have had, they do not carry the same stigma that bastards in other plays face. As Geisweidt points out, even though all of the children who appear in this production are illegitimate, they are also all passing as legitimate with the one exception of the country wench's infant. Geisweidt claims that these illegitimate children are able to fulfill the social values detailed above – that is, legitimate their parents' social standing – and are therefore able to prosper in society “so long as Whorehound and the Allwits sustain their fiction of the children's legitimacy” (126). The infant in the basket, on the other hand, is not made a part of the patriarchal system and is therefore an outcast, given away by its mother to strangers (2.2). Even though the play makes the distinction between illegitimate children who are able to fit into the patriarchal system and those who cannot, reinforcing that system does not seem to be one of the play's concerns. This seems odd when bastards in other plays seem to be a direct affront to the patriarchal order, as I will discuss in the chapter on tragedy. *A Chaste Maid* once again, however, does not follow the same logic as other plays and in fact makes fun of the patriarchy that other Comedies work so hard to reinforce by making the characters appear to care more about the presence of a child than who its actual parents are – a logic that mainly comes from the play's materialistic focus.

Even though *A Chaste Maid* subverts the generic convention to contain adult sexuality within the patriarchal system, it is still surprising when pre-pubescent children become reflections of that sexuality. It is even more surprising, however, when children themselves are seen in terms of future sexuality. Again looking at adult interactions with the Allwit newborn, this is just the case. The parents do not do so (in fact, the parents in this play don't seem to have much to say to or about their own children until they either go to school, like Tim, or are ready to be married, like Moll), but the other characters, the nurses, gossips and Puritan women hint at the

baby's future sexuality. One nurse claims that she'll "be a knocker" (2.2.27) – that is, a knockout—and Allwit himself, to the girl that is not his girl, states that she "looks as if/ she had two thousand pound to her portion and run away/ with a tailor. A fine, plump black-eyed slut" (2.2.13-15). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it was not uncommon to use "slut" playfully during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, teasing a girl for inappropriate boldness, impertinence, or loose moral character. However, combined with Allwit's remark about the infant's dowry and future elopement reveals that he is already speculating (albeit playfully) about the development of her sexuality. The other characters, a couple of gossips and Puritan women attending the christening celebration, see the girl's sexuality through their religious lens as one of them comments that she looks built to "raise up seed" (3.2.18). Their interpretation of the infant's sexuality is translated in terms of having children and thus fulfilling women's divinely appointed role (Reynolds 31). While these remarks are not necessarily out of the ordinary (adults are naturally prone to speculate on the future of children), it seems particularly disturbing in this case knowing that these children will in fact grow up in an environment that casually markets sex. Middleton's uniquely dismissive attitude toward comedy's usual theme of containing sexuality thus reflects on children in a way that no other early modern comedy could.

The final function of children within *A Chaste Maid* is that they reveal certain characteristics in those around them. Witmore argues that while Renaissance artists tried to define childhood itself by comparing children to other groups (often compared to adults, demons and angels, or were aligned with disenfranchised groups like animals, the illiterate, and the indigent (26)), children also acted as a defining force themselves. By examining characters in their interactions with children, the characters' attitudes toward various parts of society become apparent. Especially emphasized are the parts of society that the play already highlights: the

commodification of people and the casual sexuality that is taken for granted in this literary version of Cheapside.

To round out the discussion of children's functions, I would like to end with a brief discussion of the children who appear onstage, starting with Nick and Watt Allwit, who together make up the single largest amount of lines allotted to children in any comedy. Between them, they have three lines. In the second scene of the play, they join both their biological and presumptive fathers onstage and each calls "God-den, father" to Sir Walter (1.2.122; 124). Allwit quickly tells them to be quiet as if he is worried that Sir Walter will become displeased with their family if he hears his own biological children calling to him. The boys, however, play the part of innocents who either do not understand or care about the nature of their relationship to Sir Walter and are therefore unafraid to recognize that relationship publicly. The next time the boys are onstage, they have quite the opposite reaction to Sir Walter, who lays wounded after the duel with Touchwood Jr. Allwit prompts them to say something to comfort Whorehound, but Nick answers only, "I dare not. I am afraid" (5.1.86). The boys sadly go from freely addressing Sir Walter to being afraid of him. Even though their characters are not developed as they could be, Middleton takes advantage of the presence of these children, using them as a comparison for Allwit. While Allwit plays the ridiculous character who functions outside even this strange society's rules, at least he is not as clueless as to the workings of this society as his two children.

The country wench's baby in the basket also adds a unique dimension to the play in terms of the comedic conventions at work in *A Chaste Maid*. Lawrence Danson states that comedies "define an outside as well as an inside" (85). While he and Emma Smith agree that Sir Walter occupies the role of outsider by the end of the play, exiting the comedy in a manner not dissimilar to Malvolio or Shylock, I argue that the baby in the basket is also labelled as an

outsider. This baby, unlike the other illegitimate children in the play, is not being passed off as legitimate and therefore has no social value at all. As Geisweidt points out, this child is the only one who is “not welcomed to the feast” and “receive[s] little of the estate’s care” (128). While the Allwit children and the expected Kix baby all stand to inherit from their parents and seem to have financial stability at the end of the play, the baby in the basket is abandoned by its mother and left in the care of publicly despised figures who value it even less than the meat it shares the basket with. Even though this comedy is not concerned with “pure” bloodlines (that will be more of an issue in the next chapter), it does send a subtle reminder that children always symbolize the patriarchal structure, even if that structure is a little twisted to fit into its already topsy-turvy world.

## **Conclusion**

Thus, while comedies usually concern sexuality, plays in this genre normally seek to direct the sexuality of its protagonists toward a societally acceptable end, a companionate, happy marriage, where both man and wife play their proper role. *A Chaste Maid*, however, subverts these conventions by exploring unconventional sexuality within and outside of marriage, and in so doing, introduces children as both sign and symptom of normative and unconventional sexual roles in marriage.

Although children did not fit within the usual frameworks of Comedy, they also emphasize Comedy’s close ties with Tragedy. Even though the baby in the basket has no lines and only appears on stage for a few minutes, its presence complicates the conventions of comedy more than any of the other children. The illegitimate children of Sir Walter make fun of the

patriarchal system and its conservative sexuality that the genre of Comedy is focused on reinforcing, but the baby in the basket reminds audiences that the patriarchal system is exclusive. Children symbolize the future, but this particular child reminds audiences that the happy endings of Comedy cannot be for everyone.

## Chapter 2: From Weddings to Funerals: Tragic Children in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*

Like comedy, the genre of tragedy often includes sexuality in its main plot lines. In Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*, for example, virtually every plot point revolves around sex in some form or other. Junior Brother is sentenced to death for raping Lord Antonio's wife. Vindice plans to kill Lussurioso for causing the death of Gratziana, who had her murdered because she would not yield to his lecherous desires. At the same time, Vindice also plays the bawd to his own sister on behalf of Lussurioso. Despite the play's fixation on sexuality and its consequences, it curiously does not deal with children that result from a sexual encounter. In fact, the play effectively kills off the only possibility of a child with the suicide of Lord Antonio's wife, who commits suicide after her rape to avoid "liv[ing] in shame" (1.4.17).

Across the genre of tragedy, the story goes much the same way. Women occasionally hint at a pregnancy shortly before their death, as *Hamlet's* Ophelia, Joan of Arc in *Henry VI Part 1*, and *The Duchess of Malfi's* Cariola do, but a child is never born. As we did in the last chapter, this chapter explores the strange exclusion of children from tragedy by examining the conventions of tragedy, and by exploring one tragedy that defies these conventions, *The Duchess of Malfi*. In this play, the Duchess herself appears onstage visibly pregnant at full-term, and she gives birth three times during the course of the play, one of which occurs offstage but while the play itself is occurring in a scene where her husband entertains the audience onstage by playing the anxious father. Two of these three children are murdered by the end of the fourth act, which is a fate that the other children in tragedy share (Lady McDuff's son in *Macbeth*). In the last chapter, I discussed how the generic timeframe of comedy took place before children could enter the scene, as they took place before and ended with a marriage. Tragedy, on the other hand, does

focus on plot lines that come after marriage, so children could here be included, but are not. Using John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*'s, as an exceptional tragedy that includes children, I will argue that, as with *A Chaste Maid*, *The Duchess* is a meta-tragedy, self-consciously commenting on its own generic origins. It is because of the play's generic uniqueness that children are included, and are ultimately used to enhance the genre's themes of patriarchy and the fear of female sexuality. Yet the very uniqueness of *Duchess* can help us to better understand why normally there are not children in this genre.

## **The Tragedy**

As with *Chaste Maid*, before discussing the central play in this chapter, it is important to discuss the genre of tragedy itself. This can begin to give us a sense of why children, though more common in this genre than in comedy, are still largely excluded.

When describing tragedy, most scholars agree on two things. First, it is a less-defined genre than comedy. Both Stephen Greenblatt and Lawrence Danson argue that, due to *Cymbeline*'s inclusion in the tragedy section of the Folio, "there is nothing fixed or absolute about the boundaries of Shakespearean genres" (Greenblatt 957). Tragedy in particular is difficult to define since it shares so many conventions with comedy and history. In fact, the early modern genre theorist Northrup Frye argues that "tragedy is really implicit or uncompleted comedy" while "comedy contains a potential tragedy within itself" (65). Comedies and Tragedies, then, are not generic opposites, but are inextricably connected. *Romeo and Juliet* (c. 1595) exemplifies the interconnectedness of the two genres as a tragedy with a comedic structure (the lovers' desire to marry is blocked by their parents amidst a series of mishaps). In comedies,

the tragic elements make the happy ending sweeter, but in tragedies like *Romeo and Juliet*, the comedic elements make the loss of what might have been more profound. Due to tragedy's relative generic looseness, there is more room for experimentation, which could partially explain why there are more children in tragedy than in comedy (there are also children in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Titus Andronicus*, and in their Senecan sources, such as Seneca's *Trojan Women*, which includes Andromache's young son, Astyanax). However, comparing the number of tragedies which include children and which do not, it is still apparent that the young people are usually excluded from this genre.

One possible argument is that children were not included in the genre because they would have increased the audience's level of emotional distress. Michael Witmore suggests that children are "intensifiers." Not only does an audience respond with sympathy to a heartfelt moment between a parent and their child, and become filled with righteous indignation when a child is harmed, Witmore claims that audiences responded empathetically to child characters. In other words, playwrights want audiences to identify with child characters so that "whatever is done to the child becomes what the play does, emotionally, to its auditor" (141). The problem with using children in tragedy, then, becomes one of intensifying the emotional distress that audience members feel to a point where they feel manipulated or so distressed that they can no longer pay attention to the play. However, there is a subgenre of tragedy, Jacobean drama, that is notorious for purposefully creating an excess of horror. Critics like Susan Sontag argue that even though these types of plays present themselves seriously, they cannot be taken as such because they are so over-the-top in their descriptions of violence and death (qtd. in Smith "The Revenger's Tragedy" 0:13:30). Even these plays that revel in shocking their audiences do not

include children, which leads me to believe that there is another explanation for their continued absence in tragedy.

The reason for their exclusion comes from the purpose of tragedy itself. While comedies deal with the struggles individuals go through before marriage, tragedies deal with the loss of a family, whether that be literal or metaphoric, and they often feature a loss of the self. Stephen Greenblatt's definition of tragedy highlights the emotional turmoil inherent in the genre that makes it less likely that children would be present, but it emphasizes the many losses experienced by characters in these plays:

[Tragedy] is the artistic form that has grappled strenuously with the most excruciatingly difficult, intractable elements of human experience: a seemingly accidental succession of circumstances that leads to a catastrophic end; a current of envy, anger, or unappeasable desire that undermines a psychic and moral framework built up over a lifetime; the terrible fragility of social and political relations, even those that seem most stable and secure; the sheer waste of what seems most precious – youth, innocence, love; and looming over the guilty and the innocent alike, the certainty of death (958).

It is not merely, then, that children would make this already emotionally intense genre unbearable for the audience. After all, early modern critics said that Shakespeare's *King Lear* was "too cruel, it's too difficult, it's too bleak, it's too sad" (Smith "King Lear" 0:09:24-8), and that play did not include a child. Rather, children do not have enough to lose. Tragedies revolve around the destruction of "framework[s] built up over a lifetime," and the institutions on which characters rely are exposed as "terribl[y] fragil[e]." Neither of those two things can happen to a person who has not lived long enough to establish those frameworks, so the tragic work falls to

an adult, someone who has come to rely on a certain set of rules that are stripped away. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that tragic heroes not only rely on these frameworks, they *represent* them, but it's difficult to embody a set of traditions and values if you're only five. Thus, while children may be robbed of their futures in tragedies, adults experience the loss of their all-encompassing and self-defining present.

Tragedies, then, are both individualized and socialized, neither of which encourage the use of children. In one sense, tragedies are very much the tragedy of one, a "remarkable individual" (Danson 139) who discovers that the world is not as it seems, or that the world cannot change to accommodate their needs and desires. This individualized sense of loss is made evident by the titles of the genre, which tend to feature one person, and in the Renaissance, this person was usually a well-to-do man: *Hamlet*, *Doctor Faustus*, *MacBeth*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, etc. By the end of their respective plays, these title characters all realize that the world they thought they lived in is not what they thought it was. The rules have changed and these individuals are unable to find a place under the new establishment. As stated above, children themselves have not lived long enough to develop a deep trust in a certain establishment, nor do they have the reasoning capability of their adult counterparts. Tragedies that center on children would not have the same weight nor complexity as those that explore the inner struggles of an adult who has gone their entire lives believing the world was one way only to find that they are wrong.

This aspect of tragedy—that it represents someone finding out that their view of the world is either unworkable or wrong—makes tragedy equally unfriendly towards children even in minor roles. Although tragedies ultimately focus on one person, they also conventionally feature the destruction of a society. It is not merely the title character who dies, but with them die

most of the other members of their households and royal courts. Children in tragedies do not escape the fate of those around them, dying in the midst of everyone else in particularly tragic moments. Allowing the children to live would contradict the hopeless endings that define tragedy. Referring to Shakespeare's Romance *The Winter's Tale*, Emma Smith claims that the child who lives means that "tragedy will not be [the play's] final word, that there is a post-tragic future, winter ends, and children represent that new growth buried in the frozen earth" ("*The Duchess of Malfi*" 0:18:14-26). While Romances, a peculiar blend of tragedy and comedy, are able to incorporate children without anyone raising an eyebrow, the kind of hope they symbolize at the end of a play, if they live, would subvert the traditional ending of a tragedy. Instead of definitively concluding with the complete destruction of a society, a child suggests that the society will, in time, be rebuilt and that two characters at least, the child's parents, will have their legacies continue on.

### ***The Duchess of Malfi* as a Tragedy**

Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* is an unusual tragedy that not only incorporates children, but allows one of them to live. The young one's inclusion in this play simultaneously comments on tragedy's generic constraints while escaping the melodramatic nature of the Jacobean macabre. The play opens onto the Duchess' court, where her brothers, the Cardinal and Ferdinand, tell the recently widowed Duchess that they do not want her to remarry. After solemnly promising to obey them, the Duchess successfully woos her steward, Antonio. Together, they have three children in the course of the play, one of which is born offstage while Antonio and the servant Bosola converse onstage. Fearing that their sister would disobey them thusly, the Duchess'

brothers have in fact planted Bosola to spy in her household. As soon as he discovers the identity of the father of the Duchess' children, he informs Ferdinand and the Cardinal, who capture the Duchess, her two youngest children, and her maid Cariola. Ferdinand, the brother most offended by the Duchess' marriage, attempts to make his sister go mad before killing her onstage along with her maid. The two children, who are killed offstage, along with the sight of the Duchess' dead body, cause Bosola to have a change of heart. He vows to kill the Cardinal in order to protect Antonio, but he accidentally kills the one he swore to protect, who was visiting the Cardinal in the hopes of a reconciliation despite the warnings of the ghostly echoes of the Duchess. Ferdinand, who has developed a case of lycanthropy (he believes he is a werewolf) since his sister's death, kills the Cardinal in his madness. He also fatally wounds Bosola, who in turn kills him before his death. The tragedy ends as a friend of Antonio's escorts the Duchess' and Antonio's eldest son onstage, presenting him as the Duchess' rightful heir.

Critics have focused their analyses on the complicated performances of masculinity and femininity as well as the meta-theatricality of the play. I will return to the latter momentarily. As to the first, scholars have often focused on the complicated femininity of the Duchess. Sid Ray compares the title character to Queen Elizabeth, who sought to differentiate her personal gender of femininity from her ruling persona, which she defined as masculine. Ray concedes Emma Smith's argument that the Duchess is able to wield masculine authority (proposing to Antonio instead of vice versa), but, as he puts it, "she never abandons her femininity" (21). Lars Engle and Frank Whigham focus on how her role as a widow complicates her ability to control her own domestic sphere, specifically her sexuality, in the patriarchal system she inhabits. Kate Aughterson, on the other hand, argues that we should explore the various representations of masculinity given by Antonio, Ferdinand and Bosola. She contends that the masculinity

portrayed by Ferdinand and the Cardinal are outdated modes of aristocratic behavior, but that neither Bosola, who plays the malcontent, nor Antonio, a steward, offer valid models to follow either (61). Unsurprisingly, scholars have approached the presence of children in this play in terms of the Duchess' sexuality and Ferdinand's insistence on a traditional patriarchal system. (Fielitz; Ellerbeck; Maxwell). However, none of them has acknowledged the generic implications of their presence. Smith, as the one exception, argues that the children invoke the ideology of a comedy (00:18:51-59). I would like to build on the discussion of the meta-theatricality of the play as a gateway into the generic cross-referencing that Smith notices. I argue that the play's generic otherness allows children to enter the tragedy without undermining its high tragic tone.

Much like *A Chaste Maid*, critics label *The Duchess of Malfi* as a meta-tragedy, one that self-consciously acknowledges, and occasionally rejects, generic boundaries. The scene where this is most apparent occurs when the Duchess is shown what are, unbeknownst to her, wax figures, but which she takes to be the murdered members of her family. In this overtly theatrical scene, Ferdinand evidently has gone through some trouble and expense to set up this horrific scene for his sister in the hopes that it will "bring her to despair" (4.1.118), which is the reaction that viewers of the play would likely also have. Emma Smith argues that readers of the play are aware that the figures are not the Duchess' real family members because the stage direction tells us they are "artificial figures" (4.1.56). Viewers of the play, however, might well mistake the figures to be Antonio and his children just as the Duchess does, either because of the dimly lit stage of the dimly lit stage where it was performed, or because many productions even today "have the Antonio and children actors standing there, ghostly still, in an enactment that both verifies and undermines Ferdinand's piece of theater" (0:22:29-40).

This carefully staged scene draws attention to the fact that everything in the play is a fiction. As the Duchess mourns for the representations of her family members as though they were “true substantial bodies” (4.1.117), the audience also mourns her and her children’s deaths in the next scene as though their fictional representations were real. Although Sheetal Lodhia argues that the wax figures are meant to draw attention to the distinction between the body and soul (155), Lynn Maxwell contends that this scene “collapse[s] together the actors playing and the characters being played” (50). The power of this kind of meta-theatrical moment in tragedies, she argues, is that audiences will continue to be “moved by the presentation of bodies, even though [they] have just been reminded of the artificiality of the stage” (51). The inclusion of children in this dismal scene no doubt helped to achieve this affect, but more importantly, the emphasis on the constructed nature of the play itself opened up the possibility that the rules governing that construction could be played with, including the one that excludes children.

The characters in the play also draw attention to the play’s generic conventions by expressing an awareness of an outside force, guiding their actions, leading them to their destruction -- something that Greenblatt claims is common in tragedy (965). These characters, however, take this awareness one step further and relate their actions directly to tragic drama, particularly when it comes to the deaths in the play. As Ferdinand looks at his sister’s dead body, he relates Bosola’s part in the murder to a common dramatic trope: “[W]e observe in tragedies/ That a good actor many times is cursed/ For playing a villain’s part” (4.2.287-9). The comparison of an actor is particularly apt for Bosola, who has in essence “played a part” the entire time he resided in the Duchess’ household. The spy seems to accept the metaphor for himself, answering an inquiry about how he came to kill Antonio in the last act by saying, “Such a mistake as I have often seen/ In a play” (5.5.113-4). In both of these cases, the men invoke the

imagery of a play to deflect responsibility for their actions. If, after all, they were only actors playing a part in a play, they had no choice but to follow through with their scripted actions.

The Duchess relies on a similar narrative when she is faced, or so she believes, with her murdered husband and children. After the confrontation with the wax figures, in fact, the Duchess continuously draws attention to the theatricality of her imprisonment, as when she laments, “I account this world a tedious theater/ For I play a part in’t ‘gainst my will” (4.1.84-5). While she may have had to continue a while longer in the “tedious theater,” she rejects the part that Ferdinand has written for her. Her declaration that she is “Duchess of Malfi still” indicates to the audience that despite the mad performance going on around her, she never forgets the larger tragedy of which she is the heroine. Moments before death, she also denies her murderers the typical performance of one about to be killed. When Bosola asks her if the rope which is to strangle her frightens her, she answers, “Not a whit./ What would it pleasure me to have my throat cut/ With diamonds, or to be smothered/ With cassia, or to be shot to death with pearls?” (4.2.210-15). Rather than beg for her life, she rejects the role that is expected of her and remains true to her own script. It is this self-conscious rejection of tragedy at different moments in the play that allow for possibilities outside the usual generic limits. If the characters themselves deny their parts that are dictated by tragedy, then the conventions of tragedy itself can be bent a little.

### **Children in *The Duchess of Malfi***

This play goes still further, not only questioning and occasionally rejecting tragic elements, but emphasizing the comedic possibilities that Frye claims are inherent in all tragedies (65). For instance, the Duchess’ brothers try to block her sexual desires, as fathers in comedies are apt to

do. The successful wooing, marriage and subsequent domestic felicity of the Duchess seems to belong in a comedy, but it is the children, as Emma Smith points out, that invoke the comedic themes of fertility, rebirth and “new futures” (0:17:58-18:02). She goes on to argue that the children’s presence introduces the possibility of a different ending for the play:

In popping all these children in the middle of the play, the Duchess and the tragedy that bears her name seem to be trying to elude the narrative logic of the play in which they find themselves, making a last-ditch attempt to reestablish, to rewrite this story as comedy rather than tragedy. The children are indeed incongruous in the play...because they belong to and gesture towards another incompatible genre (“*Duchess*” 0:18:27-59).

“Incompatible” though they may be, the ending of this play does subvert both aims of tragedy, the destruction of an individual and of a society, into an almost comedic state where, through the survival of her eldest son by Antonio, neither the Duchess’ aims nor her family is completely destroyed. Indeed, because they are present in a genre that does not normally include them, children are able to perform unique functions in this play, namely to enhance the genre’s fixation on the fear of female sexuality and to define the adult characters through their interactions with children.

By comparing the play to Webster’s source, children’s ability to expose others’ characters becomes evident as do the generic boundaries that guide the plot. The tale originates in William Painter’s *Palace of Pleasure* (c. 1566-7), wherein a recently widowed Duchess convinces her steward, Antonio, to marry her. Her brothers discover the marriage and capture the Duchess and her two youngest children, eventually killing them after a period of imprisonment. Antonio and his eldest child escape, but the murderous brothers hire Daniel de Bozola, who kills

Antonio in an ambush. Painter's narrative, like so many other accounts of the story, has an obvious didactic bent, supplementing the plot with judgments on the characters and warning readers which actions should be avoided. The murder of the children, which is described at length, is one scene where this seems unnecessarily emphasized:

But hearken now the most sorrowful scene of all the tragedy. The little children, which had seen all the furious game done upon their mother and her maid, as nature provoked them – or as some presage of their mishap led them thereunto – kneeled upon their knees before those tyrants [their uncles], and embracing their legs, wailed in such wise, as I think that any other, except a pitiless heart spoiled of all humanity, would have had compassion. And impossible it was for them to unfold the embracements of these innocent creatures, which seemed to forethink their death by the wild looks and countenance of those roisters [swaggering bullies] ...The Aragon brethren meant hereby nothing else but to root out the whole name of Bologna. And therefore the two ministers of iniquity did like murder and slaughter upon those two tender babes as they committed upon their mother, not without some motion of horror for doing of an act so detestable (155).

Painter's morality tale clearly defines every character in the scene, labelling the children as "innocent creatures" while calling the Duchess' brothers "tyrants," "ministers of iniquity" and "roisters." He ends the account with a warning to others: "You see the miserable discourse of a Princesse loue, that was not very wyse, and of a Gentleman that had forgotten his estate, which ought to serue for a lookinge Glasse to them which bee ouer hardy in makinge Enterprises" (160).

Webster's dramatic adaptation drops the moralistic overtones of the source and takes a few liberties with minor details, such as cutting the period of time the family is able to reside peacefully in Ancona and enlarging and complicating Bosola's character, but the play is strikingly similar to its source. The death scene of the children is one of the most drastic changes that Webster makes. The playwright changed who actually murders the children, but more importantly, he silenced the children's pleas, explaining through an exchange between Bosola and the Duchess that they are too young to "prattle" (3.5.115). In the play, Bosola gives the order to "strangle them" (4.2.236), and even though both the Duchess and Cariola have just been murdered onstage, the play directs that the child murders are "done offstage." The last the audience sees of them is when Bosola "shows the children strangled" (4.2.255) in an attempt to make Ferdinand feel guilty, but Ferdinand responds, "The death/ Of young wolves is never to be pitied" (4.2.255-7). There are two reasons Painter's scene of children begging unsuccessfully for their lives on their knees does not fit into the tragic genre (though we will see a similar scene in *King John* in the next chapter where a child successfully dissuades his murderer from carrying out the deed). To put them succinctly, the onstage murder of children would alienate the audience and leaves no room for ambiguity of character for Ferdinand or the Cardinal.

Since I have already discussed the former, I would like to turn to the implications this scene has on the Duchess' murderous brothers. As discussed in the first chapter, one of the functions of children is to define the characters of those around them (Witmore 26). In the scene from Painter's account, the brothers' characters are defined a little too well. The brothers are portrayed as being purely evil with no room for explanations or ambiguity. Greenblatt argues that part of tragedy's focus is to provide "searching explorations of moral ambivalence" (967), so merciless uncles and begging children would not produce the kind of ethical questions required

of a tragedy. On the other hand, Sheetal Lodhia and Lynn Maxwell both argue that the emotional impact of Webster's tragedy lies in its searching questions about what it means to be human. The wax figures and constant references to the Duchess and Ferdinand's connection to nature (her with fertile plants, him with werewolves) raise questions about the boundaries between nature and humanity and how that affects a person's morality.

Ferdinand's transformation into a werewolf presents a particularly poignant part of this conversation because he shows remorse after his sister is dead – something villains like Shakespeare's Titus and Marlowe's Tamburlaine never do. Many scholars have focused their criticism on explaining Ferdinand's actions. Charles Wilkinson and Frank Whigham for example) views himself and his twin as two halves of a whole. Elizabeth Oakes states that the Cardinal was correct in accusing Ferdinand of "transferring" his own "imperfections" onto their sister (63), and Sheryl Craig argues that Ferdinand's madness that appears only after his sister's death is grounded in the fact that "he considers her to be merely an extension of his own body" (22). She adds that the conflicted twin relationship would have had a strong biblical connotation (Jacob and Esau) for its early modern audience. Hence, when the Duchess dies, the symbolic "good" half of the set leaves behind the "bad" half to become something subhuman, manifested in Ferdinand's lycanthropic delusions. These arguments are all made possible by Webster's alteration to the child's death scene. If Ferdinand had killed his own sister's children onstage after they had pleaded for their lives, there would be much less room for interpreting his character. Webster's version leaves behind the morally black and white nature of Painter's account and, by pushing the children to the side literally and figuratively, allows room for a more nuanced portrayal of the Duchess' brother more fitting of a tragedy.

Despite the fact that they do not often appear in tragedy for the reasons I have just named, children in *Duchess* also enhance some of the main focuses of the genre – the fear of female sexuality and the perceived threat it poses to the patriarchal system. As physical evidence of the Duchess' sexuality, the news of the Duchess giving birth incenses the brothers. The Cardinal exclaims, "Shall our blood,/ The royal blood of Aragon and Castile,/ Be thus attainted?" (2.5.21-3). The brothers' anger stems in large part from the corruption to their noble bloodline that an illegitimate child represented. Unlike in *A Chaste Maid*, bastards in tragedies are not something to boast of. Not only would an illegitimate child jeopardize the family's connection to royalty, it also represents a dangerous threat to the patriarchal system because of the traditions of inheritance that followed a patriarchal line of succession. Michael Neill states that "Illegitimate birth...amounted to the debasement of a sacred patriarchal image" (401). Through a monetary comparison, he explains that illegitimate children, especially boys, were the equivalent of counterfeited coins because they presented an awkward problem to the line of succession as falsified coins would do to a cash system. Just as a king had exclusive rights to impress his image onto coins, fathers were also considered the sole figure that impressed their images onto their children. "The spurious child," he argues, "constitutes a living affront to the patriarchal order, seeming by his 'stolen' existence to cancel the father out, implicitly denying the exclusive function of the womb as patriarchal mint" (406). Those firmly invested in the "man-as-king philosophy" discussed earlier would view illegitimate children as denying men the power of creating their own bloodline, making patriarchs seem unnecessary and robbing them of their claim to power. Even though the Duchess' marriage to Antonio is legitimate in the eyes of the church, the brothers refuse to acknowledge it as such and continually refer to her children as

bastards (2.5.29; 4.1.35-8). To these two men, the Duchess' children represent an affront to their patriarchal authority and an unwelcome future for their ancient family.

To Ferdinand, however, the children are also physical proof of his sister's sexuality. During their earlier conversation with the Duchess, he scorns the Cardinal's suggestion that she might marry for a title, so his fears about his sister's sexuality are not solely class-related. He tries to justify his attitude by claiming that only the "most luxurious [i.e. lecherous]/ will wed twice" (1.1.298-9), but his attitude is not supported by his society. In fact, in between 1600 and 1659, half of the widows in their twenties and thirties remarried. Not only could they remarry without society's disapproval, they could also choose whomever they liked without relying on their family to make the match (Oakes 56). As Elizabeth Oakes points out, "[Ferdinand], not her society, is condemning her to a life of solitude" (54). Although Ferdinand's attitude does not reflect his society's views, it is right in line with a character from this genre: "The tragic man's fear of female sexuality is also his fear of woman's freedom from masculine control" (Danson 137). For Ferdinand, however, his sister's sexuality seems to have personal significance. Though he tells Bosola, "Do not you ask the reason [I would not have the Duchess remarry], but be satisfied/ I say I would not" (1.1.259-60), he betrays his feelings when he learns she has given birth. He asks his brother to "talk to [him] somewhat" in order to prevent him from imagining her "in the shameful act of sin" with a "strong-thighed bargeman,/ Or one o'th'woodyard, that can quoit the sledge<sup>3</sup>/ Or toss the bar, or else some lovely squire/ That carries coals up to her privy lodgings" (3.1.43-6). It is important to note that he imagines the Duchess *in flagrante delicto* because of the birth of her child, so he essentially collapses the child with the act of its conception. That is why, when asked by Bosola if he feels remorse when looking upon the

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<sup>3</sup> Throw the sledgework (because they're so muscular)

corpses of the Duchess' two youngest, Ferdinand responds, "The death/ Of young wolves is never to be pitied" (4.2.256-7). He does not "see" the children, he only sees the presumably sinful way they were created, thus fulfilling the typical tragic man's fear of female sexuality.

Yet the children's interactions with their mother create a generic problem. Rather than justify a fear of female sexuality, the children and the Duchess demonstrate how natural and humanizing motherhood is, especially when compared to the unnaturalness of Ferdinand and the Cardinal. According to Emma Smith, the Duchess on her own "both is and is not sympathetic" because she lies to her brothers about her plans to remarry, "tricks Antonio" into marrying her, and refuses the opportunity to cultivate the audience's sympathy in her only soliloquy (0:08:16-10:10). The relationship with her children, however, humanizes her. Before her first child is even born, she breaks her usual self-control and ravenously eats the apricots Bosola offers her (2.1.136), revealing that she is subject to cravings like any other pregnant woman. Her last words to Cariola, "[L]ook thou giv'st my little boy/ Some syrup for his cold, and let the girl/ Say her prayers ere she sleep" (4.2.199-201), emphasizes her self-control in such a moment, but they also show her love for her children because she was able to think about what they needed even as her own life was about to be taken. To these examples, productions often add touching moments where the Duchess plays on the floor with her children. Each interaction with her children demonstrates how female sexuality can bring out the more human side of women.

The Duchess' children further complicate the issue of female sexuality because the Duchess's claim to her political power is through her eldest son. Some scholars believe that the Duchess's child by her first marriage is unimportant. In a footnote, Lars Engle argues that the boy, mentioned only in 3.3.69-71, "probably represent[s] a discarded strand of plot that Webster failed to expunge entirely" (1754). However, Sid Ray points out that the Duchess is able to "rule

in her son's stead, [...] falling to her because her son is still too young to assume the responsibilities of duke" (19). Throughout the play, she demonstrates again and again that she is able to balance her responsibilities of rule with those of motherhood. Ray argues that the play "naturalize[s] and legitimize[s] female rule" (28). Since Tragedies traditionally punish women who step outside the patriarchal system, *The Duchess of Malfi* is truly exceptional in pushing the boundaries of the genre, questioning its most basic assumptions about who deserves to have power, and the compatibility of power and family.

## Conclusion

Tragedies, therefore, usually focus on the destruction of societies and the remarkable individuals who embody the traditions and values of those societies. Since it is difficult for children to embody societal frameworks and their life after the play would subvert the genre's aims to annihilate its main character's future, children are generally excluded from Tragedy. *The Duchess of Malfi*'s unique emphasis on meta-theatricality throughout the play emphasizes the patriarchy's own constructedness, thereby encouraging the audience to question whether or not the destruction in this play, carried out in the name of that structure, is just.

In answer to its own question, *The Duchess* provides an alternative to strict patriarchal adherence by allowing some aspects of the title character's values and wishes to live on after she has died. The events of Webster's play are set into motion because the Duchess does not want to spend the rest of her life as "the figure cut in alabaster/ Kneel[ing] at [her] husband's tomb" (1.1.455-6). She chooses to live by marrying where she will and creating a new family, complete with three children. If this were a comedy, her will would ultimately be subjected to the

majority's (aka the old-fashioned patriarchy her brothers represent that refuses to sanction her marriage with a man of lower social standing) (Danson 139). Since she is already married, however, there is little that her brothers can do. As a result, she, like other individuals in tragedy, affects everyone else with her choices, leading to the destruction of an entire society (Danson 139). Scholars like Sonja Fielitz argue that women like the Duchess, who "transgress the boundaries" of society bring about "destruction" (53). I concede that the Duchess' choices result in the death of a society, but I would add that her will is not completely destroyed at the end of the play. After witnessing her strength when faced with death, Bosola vows to protect the Duchess' remaining family. He exclaims, "Still methinks the Duchess/ Haunts me... O Penitence, let me truly taste thy cup" (5.3.364-6). For Bosola, she continues to have a presence even after her death. In a more direct way, she communicates with Antonio after her death as an echo (5.3). While her warning to stay away from the Cardinal goes unheeded by her husband, the fact that she is still a presence after her death attests to her extraordinary spirit. Both instances of her post-death influence on other characters are unusual in the realm of tragedy because of the genre's insistence on its characters' inability to change their societies and their ultimate, complete destruction.

The Duchess' surviving child is the only way in which the Duchess' values and willpower are given a future, and where, after all, a child is able to symbolize a societal framework. The Duchess tells Ferdinand that she "[has] not gone about, in this [marriage], to create/ Any new world or custom" (3.2.112-3), but that is what she does. Despite Ferdinand's horror that Antonio's "baser" blood will mingle with his aristocratic blood, despite the existence of a son by her first marriage, and despite questions about his legitimacy, the eldest son of a steward and an aristocrat inherits the duchy and will become duke. This detail is even more

poignant when compared to the source, where the child “was forced to fly out of Milan, to change his name, and to retire himself far off, where he died unknown” (163). Most tragedies have lone survivors (Horatio in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Antonio in Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, Franklin in the anonymous *Arden of Faversham*, etc.), but no other tragedy ends with a child of the hero poised to ascend to his parent’s place in society, let alone one who does not fit into society’s prescribed norms. Some productions of Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* end with Aaron’s baby onstage. For instance, the 1999 film adaptation of *Titus* directed by Julie Taymor ends with Lucius carrying Aaron’s baby into the sunrise. Nevertheless, while that text does allow for this ending, it does not demand or require it explicitly—That is, the script does not put a baby into the scene, or explicitly or implicitly refer to a baby in stage directions. *The Duchess of Malfi* is the only tragedy to explicitly state that the child of one of the heroes will be “establish[ed].../In ‘s mother’s right” (5.5.130-1). While the play does fulfill its generic duty to explore “the most excruciatingly difficult, intractable elements of human experience” (Greenblatt 957), the presence of the Duchess’ and Antonio’s child gives the title character’s legacy a future and concludes the play on a hopeful note in a way that is otherwise alien to tragedy.

### Chapter 3: The History of Kings, but Not Princes: Historical Children in Shakespeare's

#### *King John*

"Ah, my young princes! Ah my tender babes!" exclaims Queen Elizabeth when she learns of her young sons' murder (*Richard III*, 4.4.9). At this point in the play, Richard has already killed several adults, but the murder of the children gives one final proof of his lack of humanity. The other children in Histories all suffer the same fate, as Rutland is murdered onstage in *3 Henry VI* and Arthur in *King John* dies while trying to escape by jumping off a high wall. While there are clearly more child characters in History than in Tragedy and Comedy combined, those that do appear play a part similar to those found in conventional Tragedy – that is, to define the characters' of those around them and draw attention to the flaws of the patriarchal system.

In chapters one and two, I have argued that the conventions of time and the generic purpose of Comedy and Tragedy were fixed so as to exclude children. Comedies feature a timeframe, the courtship and marriage of a couple, which children are rarely a part of. Tragedies dealt with the destruction of an individual's will, so any children included in the genre had to be killed in order to complete the picture of devastation lest the ending become closer to a comic ending. Histories, as the third and final genre used in the early modern period, include many of the same elements as the first two genres. There are several marriages (Henry V and Katherine, Henry VI and Margaret, Richard III and Lady Anne, etc.) and multiple deaths, and few children (though admittedly there are significantly more children in Histories than in the other two). Shakespeare's *King John* (c. 1595-6), however, not only includes a child, but places him at the center of the play. Once again, by examining the conventions of the history play and *King John* as an usual exception, we are better able to see why children are excluded from History plays, and also how their unique function in this one work. In this chapter, following a review of the

history play as a genre, I will argue that due to its reliance on source material, unique inclusion of allegorical elements and subsequent meta-theatricality, the play is able to exploit Arthur's youthful innocence as a contrast to the other more experienced, but ultimately more misguided, characters around him.

## **The History Play**

Originating in England in the mid-1560s, history plays were a brand-new genre, unlike comedy and tragedy, which had classical routes. Unlike the other two generic traditions, which had fairly straightforward forms and subjects that were borrowed from the Ancient Greeks, histories were a more "capacious and somewhat indeterminate" genre (Howard "Shakespearean History" 616). With a lack of a clear form, Lawrence Danson argues that histories are a genre simply because "playwrights and playgoers of the time did sometimes treat them that way" (89). Nevertheless, there are important differences between history plays and the other genres. As stated above, histories included the staples of comedy and tragedy, marriage and death respectively, but in slightly different ways. Danson argues that Histories "do not build the tragic sense of a necessary beginning leading to a dramatically inevitable end. Nor is there a comic sense that all the complex tangle of action will right itself in a grand moment of self- and social-discovery: the marriages in these plays are always part of the problem, not the solution" (92).

Although the label of the first history play has often been labelled *King Johan*, written by John Bale in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, Lawrence Danson argues that the play is instead a "mixed-morality" play, as it includes historical characters alongside allegorical ones (87). *The Famous Victories of Henry V*, written anonymously in 1588, presented a comedic rendering of its

namesake, and Robert Green's *James IV* (c. 1590) including mystical elements akin to a the genre that we now call (based on eighteenth century critics) Romance. Scholars agree, however, that Shakespeare was the playwright who formed the genre of History into what it became (Howard 616). Indeed, it is for this reason that my examples of history plays are taken exclusively from Shakespeare's canon.

I would suggest that focus of this new genre and its close relationship to its sources are the main reasons children were excluded from the genre. Howard argues that the King's Men, who published the First Folio, separated Shakespeare's plays by their "subject matter," and they labelled all the plays that dealt with English monarchical history (thus excluding Marlowe's *Tamberlaine*) after 1066 as History plays. Although children were of vital importance when it came to succession and keeping power within the family, they did not play a large part in the political actions of the court until they were much older. As to its sources, Howard argues that late sixteenth-century writers of history in an antiquarian mode rejected theological renderings of history and encouraged the careful scrutiny of sources, encouraged Shakespeare's disinterest in providence in his depiction of history (618). As a result, his Histories are much less allegorical than those previously written. Working from the newly published *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, Shakespeare copied the timeframe for his plays, which moved from one king's reign to the next, but he also often followed his source materials in these plays more closely than he did in his other works. Whole speeches, for instance, are copied from Holinshed for *Henry V*, adapted only enough to fit the correct meter. The sources for Shakespeare's plays rarely included children, so while the timeframe of a History could allow for them, they were not generally written into the plays.

While Shakespeare singlehandedly shaped the genre of history plays, it is important to note that he was not uninfluenced by the conventions of the other two genres. Although the formal elements of history were different, like the timeframe and setting, Shakespeare followed many of the same themes (patriarchal succession, sexuality, what makes a great leader) and rhetorical structures (juxtaposing tragic and comedic scenes, giving credibility to certain character-types) that were used in the other two genres. Shakespeare does give himself more creative license, evidenced by the surprising number of child characters in the genre; nevertheless, Shakespeare's histories are still generically conservative compared to his other invention, Romance, which includes magic and a large percentage of plays with children. Because histories inhabit worlds similar to those of tragedies and comedies, it is likely that the character conventions that accompany those worlds were followed without the playwright realizing it – a plausible explanation based on the dependence on genre during the early modern period.

In addition to the genre's reliance on source material, there are other unique circumstances that undoubtedly shaped the genre and its use of children in significant ways that should be discussed first. First and foremost was the practice of censorship. Playwrights were "forbidden to stage current affairs of state or sitting monarchs and their representatives" (Howard 617), but they also had to be careful about events that took place centuries ago. According to A.R. Braunmuller, "More readily than others...a history play implicitly asks a contemporary audience to consider the shape of its present and how that present may be understood" (39). As a result, playwrights like Shakespeare had to at least overtly agree with the reigning monarch's politics (Yerli 211). Otherwise, the Office of the Master of the Revels, to which all plays regardless of genre had to be submitted for inspection, would excise the offending lines,

characters, or entire plot lines if necessary. Officials, however, were more scrupulous with History plays because many of the issues the genre deals with, though they happened centuries before, still had relevance to theater-goers in early modern England. Playwrights, therefore, had to be careful about how they presented issues lest their carefully crafted characters, including their child characters, evoke children and current noble and royal families, and thus risk being censored out of existence.

The other forming characteristic of histories is that they cannot be a wholly contained narrative within themselves. Early modern audiences would have been familiar with the stories of past kings – indeed, it was a main part of the genre’s attractiveness. That knowledge changed the experience of the play. Add to this Shakespeare’s convention of writing histories in groups of four, or tetralogies, that each lead into the next, and there is much more going on in a play than what is presented onstage. Danson explains the impact this had on the audience’s experience of a history play:

Histories implicitly refer back to a larger narrative. Characters who may not appear on the stage in one play are nevertheless part of the play because of the part they took in an earlier play, and audiences were expected to recall events from past plays that set up or add an interesting interpretation to the plot of the present play...[H]istories require a kind of double consciousness in the audience – of the individual play and of the longer historical narrative to which it refers...But unlike the comedies and the tragedies, the individual history plays are thick with the memory or foreshadowing of one another. Events and characters literally live on beyond the boundaries of their individual plays, creating a sense of history as a

densely interconnected world of stories told and retold, remembered and misremembered. (90)

Perhaps it is because of this interconnectedness that each of the child murderers to die before the end of the play in which they kill the young ones, especially in the second tetralogy. Clifford, who appears in Parts 2 and 3 of *Henry VI* dies only after he has murdered Rutland, the child of his enemy. Richard III similarly dies after the murder of the young princes. Even Henry V, who only threatens that Harfleur's "naked infants [will be] spitted upon pikes" (3.4.38), does not survive beyond the limits of the play, his death being mentioned in the epilogue. It is almost as if neither Shakespeare nor his audience would allow child murderers to continue to live on after the play has ended.

The reason these characters are killed off is because, as in tragedy, the murder of a child signals the loss (or reveals the absence) of a character's humanity. Many of these characters commit multiple, egregious crimes, but their moral descent is not complete until they have taken the life, not just of an innocent, but of a helpless child. Once their inhumanity has been established, characters have less mystery and therefore less appeal. Richard III, for example, is intriguing precisely because throughout the play where he is the main character, he proceeds to sacrifice his humanity little pieces at a time. He has already killed men in battle, but he goes on to successfully woo Lady Anne, telling the audience that he only does so as a means to legitimate his claim to the throne and will not let her live long. He then begins killing members of the court who are loyal to Queen Elizabeth's young sons, the rightful heirs to the throne, and ultimately kills the princes themselves. At this point in the play, Richard has hit rock bottom; there is nothing left for him to do that will surprise the audience, and he in fact tries to repeat his earlier trick of wooing before dying in battle to end the play. In Richard III's case, his order to execute

the young princes proves that he will stop at nothing to obtain and keep the crown. Once this question has been answered, there is nowhere else for Richard's character, or indeed any character who murders a child, to go. Without the question of moral character to justify their presence, child murderers are swiftly executed by playwrights, who would have no further use for them in the larger narrative surrounding a History play.

### ***King John* as a History Play**

All of Shakespeare's histories are part of a tetralogy except for *King John*, which is distinct among Shakespeare's history plays in other ways as well. It deals with a 13<sup>th</sup> century monarch rather than the 15<sup>th</sup> century one, but more importantly, its themes are different. The play deemphasizes the religious undercurrent of the play, directly opposing the other history plays of the day, which were moralistic and theological. In their discussion of History plays, Howard and Danson both address *King John* separately. Danson describes the play as "confused," adding, "We have trouble reading its generic codes: we recognize conventions that are familiar to us from the other history plays, but we have difficulty seeing a consistent pattern to their deployment" (111). Howard calls the play "an anomaly" because instead of dwelling on the generic focus of "the skills needed for the successful performance of kingship," *King John* explores with "unusual realism on questions of legitimacy" (622-3). *King John* is unique in one other way. It contains a juvenile figure, Arthur, grandson to Henry II of England and nephew to King John, who is what Abhishek Sarkar calls a "small, helpless child dependent on his mother" (17). Arthur not only appears on stage, but has multiple speeches and scenes. I would argue that

the uniqueness of *King John* allows Arthur to not only enter the History play, but also to play a central role in the play's action and its exploration of two themes, legitimacy and patriarchy.

Arthur does not appear onstage until the second act, but his presence is inserted into the action of the play from the opening lines. In the opening of the play, a French emissary addresses the English court with the news that the French monarchy rejects John's right to be king and asks that he hand over the crown to Arthur, John's nephew. King John dismisses the suggestion, despite his mother's whispered comment about how he holds the crown by "strong possession much more than [his] right" (1.1.40). Before the court can begin to make preparations for the eminent war that will decide the future king of England, the two Falcounbridge brothers come in with a question concerning the right of succession. King John declares that since the elder brother, whose legitimacy is contested by his younger brother, was born to their mother within wedlock, he will inherit their family's land despite their father's will to the contrary. However, John and his mother, Eleanor, propose that the victor of the suit is Richard I's bastard son. He immediately relinquishes the inheritance he has just been granted to his brother, is knighted Sir Richard by King John, and is known as The Bastard for the remainder of the play. This secondary case of legitimacy juxtaposes the case between John and Arthur, and both of them highlight the play's underlying question about the constructedness of succession.

The remaining four acts of the play revolve around the question of whether King John will continue to rule England, or if he will be usurped by the young Arthur. The two nations meet at the gates of Anjers ready to battle each other, but instead turn on the citizens of Anjers, who refuse to open their gates to any "[b]ut he that proves the King" (2.1.270). The battle ends with the marriage of John's niece and Louis the Dauphin of France (effectively dismissing Arthur's claim to the throne), but the shaky truce between the two nations is short-lived. King John

offends an emissary of the Pope, just arrived, who then demands that King Philip of France decide between a friendship with his enemy or with the Catholic Church. Their quarrel is renewed, and Arthur is captured in the ensuing battle. Though John reassures the boy that he will “As dear be to [him] as [his] father was” (3.3.4), he orders Hubert, a citizen of Anjers, to murder the child as soon as possible. The next time the audience sees Hubert and Arthur, the former is preparing to blind the child with hot irons, a change that is never explained. The boy is able to dissuade his tormenter from carrying out his orders only to jump to his death while trying to escape shortly thereafter. Meanwhile, the English lords hear rumors of Arthur’s death and desert King John for his cruelty. Hubert, who initially reports to John that he has carried out his orders, admits that the boy is still alive, but the lords are standing over the boy’s corpse when they receive the same message. They desert John for France, only to return again when a French nobleman warns them that their own lives are in danger. The play concludes with the French being beaten off, mainly by the Bastard, as King John dies of poison administered by an unnamed monk. John’s son, Henry, is presented as the next ruler and the Bastard delivers a speech about the importance of unity within a nation.

Due to the centrality of Arthur’s demise within the drama’s plot structure, critics have tended to focus on the performance of Arthur’s death scene in their scholarship. Alan Armstrong argues that the Arthur’s death is “a crucial moment in the performance of *King John*” (2). He stresses the care productions must take to ensure that the boy’s death is not comedic, stating that “productions risk laughter if the device [that kills Arthur but does not harm the actor] is too obvious” (3). Gemma Miller concedes that Arthur’s role within the play is the “mainspring of *King John*’s plot” (220), but contends that his death is “an anticlimactic moment that is both undignified and unremarkable.” She justifies these claims by pointing out that Arthur “dies not

as an avenging challenger for the crown but as a fugitive disguised as a ship boy,” and that his fall “is caused by an accidental fall rather than a sensational assassination” (220). While the questions raised by these scholars are critical in stage interpretations of the play, the discussion about the performance of Arthur’s death is overshadowed by and takes part in the larger conversation about Shakespeare’s adaptation methods.

The most prevalent argument about the play surrounds Shakespeare’s sources – what they were and how he adapted them. Because the date the play was written on is uncertain, there has been much debate about *King John*’s relationship to another play, George Peele’s *The Troublesome Raigne of King John* (c. 1591). Gemma Miller and Alan Armstrong both claim the anonymous play as Shakespeare’s original source (221; 2), but M. G. Aune claims that Holinshed’s *Chronicles* and John Foxe’s *The Acts and Monuments* were the primary sources for Shakespeare’s play (39). Braunmuller argues that while Holinshed may have been Shakespeare’s main source, his play was undoubtedly shaped in large part by *The Troublesome Raigne* because of the “verbal similarities” and “the selection of compression of historical material and the sequence of events” (15). The differences between the play and its sources, rather than the similarities are, nevertheless, what capture scholars’ interests.

## **Arthur**

In terms of the present thesis, however, Shakespeare’s most interesting divergences from the sources is in his portrayal of Arthur. Though the historical Arthur was a teenager when he was imprisoned by King John, and *The Troublesome Raigne*’s Arthur is “an older and much more confident youth” (Sarkar 17), Shakespeare’s Arthur is a child who bursts into tears when his

mother and Eleanor argue over which of their sons should be king. In addition to making the prince several years younger, Shakespeare also changed the scenes of the child's blinding and death. Both *The Troublesome Raigne* and *King John* extend the blinding scene from Holinshed's short description, Peele's Arthur relying on logical arguments while Shakespeare's young prince reminds Hubert of the loving relationship they have (Part 1 12.1379-90; 4.1). Of Arthur's death, Holinshed claims that there are "sundrie reports," some claiming that Arthur died in prison, others that he "died of natural sicknesse," and one where he fell off of a castle wall into a river and drowned (165). Shakespeare and Peele chose to dramatize the later, disposing of the uncertainty in Holinshed's account by having him die onstage, but where Peele's Arthur gives an extended "swan song" before jumping, Arthur gives a short, 10-line speech, asking the rocks below to pity him (Part 2 1.1-11; 4.3.1-10).

Critics give a variety of reasons for these deviations depending on their approach to the play. From a performance angle, Armstrong attributes Shakespeare's version of the death scene to audience appeal, calling it the "most theatrically compelling and the most technically difficult" when compared to other historical accounts (2). Abhishek Sarkar, looking at precocious children in history plays, argues that Arthur's final scene proves that he is not the "archetypal 'sweet child'" that the other characters believe him to be. He justifies his claim by pointing out that in the final scene, Arthur's speech proves that he is smart enough to realize that 1) John means to have him killed 2) Hubert is untrustworthy and 3) he needs a disguise to avoid recapture (25-6). Emma Smith approaches the question of revision generically, arguing that "Arthur's death then is prefigured generically," so regardless of the source's presentation of Arthur's story, audiences could confidently guess at the boy's demise from the beginning of the play just by his inclusion in this genre ("*King John*" 30:00-55). Smith also states, however, that the play purposefully

excludes an explanation for the change in John's order from murder to blinding in order to mimic the uncertainty in Holinshed's account: "Shakespeare makes the question about who killed Arthur, its occluded causes and effects, how he makes that into a crucial question about the way history works and I want to suggest he gets the suggestion for this exploration from his source" (*"King John"* 0:25:28-46). I would like to build from Smith's argument about how Arthur's fate is generically anticipated and argue that it is the play's unique meta-generic discussion about the reliability of historical sources that justifies his central role in the play.

Arthur's greatest impact, generically speaking, is how his death affects the title character. On a personal level, King John does not seem to register the significance of Arthur's life. Upon hearing Hubert's first report that Arthur is dead, he plays the politician and assures the enraged Pembroke and Salisbury that his "will to give is living,/ The suit which [they] demand is gone and dead" (4.2.83-4). They do not believe that he had nothing to do with his death and leave. Once he is alone with Hubert, who he assumes oversaw the murder he ordered, John asks, "Why urgest thou so oft Young Arthur's death?" (4.2.204). He seems upset at the boy's death, even as he denies all responsibility in the face of the written order of the deed he authorized. He tells his accomplice, "How oft the sight of means to do ill deeds/ Makes ill deeds done!" He concludes the rant by claiming that the idea of murdering Arthur wouldn't have occurred to him if Hubert hadn't "been by" (4.2.219-223), effectively blaming both Providence and Hubert for his own bloody plot. John's character, however unimpressive he seems to this point, is not damaged beyond repair until he learns that Arthur yet lives. His response reveals the true reason for his momentary repentance: "Doth Arthur live? O, haste thee to the peers!/ Throw this report on their incenséd rage/ And tame them to their obedience" (4.2.260-2). Clearly, John cares naught for his young kinsman, and was only repentant because the noblemen had deserted him for it.

More than simply revealing the thing John values the most (i.e. power), Arthur's death also demonstrates what an ineffective ruler King John ultimately is. Upon capturing the young boy, King John assures Arthur that he will be "as dear to [him] as [his] father was" (3.3.4), but immediately orders Hubert to kill him. An unexplained change happens between the face-to-face interaction between John and Hubert, and when the audience next sees Arthur, Hubert is preparing to blind him with hot irons (4.1). Neither plan is executed because Arthur is able to dissuade Hubert. Arthur's death itself is yet another subversion of John's will because it is the scene immediately before the boy jumps to his death where John exclaims his joy that the boy has not been murdered. Before this, King John had been undermined multiple times throughout the action of the play. His mother had changed the outcome of the Faulconbridge brothers' case he had already ruled on (1.1). The fragile truce between England and France comes about because Hubert suggests it and King John and King Philip agree, though they are unable to maintain the alliance (2.1). King John successfully denies the Cardinal's demand that he accept Stephen Langton as the Archbishop and is excommunicating, but he ends up relenting shortly after Arthur's death. Having thus already been proven an ineffectual ruler, Arthur's death offers one final proof that King John can neither make up his mind, nor bring about his purposes.

A controversy over whether Arthur's death was accidental could, however, shift the balance of power between King John and his nephew. Braunmuller claims that Arthur's death was a suicide (9), meaning that the boy knew that he could not survive the jump. Arthur does acknowledge this possibility, saying, "The wall is high" and that it is "As good to die and go, as die and stay" (4.3.1-8). However, he also anticipates successfully completing the jump – "If I get down, and do not break my limbs,/ I'll find a thousand shifts to get away" (4.3.6-7) – and has made preparations to escape by procuring a disguise as a ship-boy (4.3.4). After his fall, he does

not blame himself for misjudging the height, but rather calls up the image of his uncle: “O me! My uncle’s spirit is in these stones” (4.3.9). This penultimate exclamation also indicates that he did not expect to die from the fall. Arthur’s young age further precludes the possibility of the jump being a suicide because even precocious nine-year-olds are liable to misjudge the height of a wall, which makes this accident even more tragic. Arthur is, after all, a little boy who did not have someone to look out for him in his last moments. To interpret Arthur’s fall as a suicide, then, changes the meaning of his death as well as its implications for John’s character. If Arthur’s death is a suicide, as Braunmuller suggests, then the boy essentially denies John power over him, and it is his will that triumphs over his uncle’s. As an accidental death, however, neither one of the two characters gains anything, and the fatality offers the final proof that neither Arthur nor John have enough power (will power or ability to accomplish their goals) to be effective leaders.

To round out the discussion of Arthur’s role, I would like to compare it to the significance of the other roles played by children in *Histories*. Although Arthur suffers the same ill fate, there is a crucial difference between his death and the others. The murder of the young princes in *Richard III* leads to several lines of lament from their mother, much as Arthur’s own mother laments his, but their deaths do not ultimately have a significant impact on the plot. Arthur’s death, on the other hand, has direct and immediate effects on a large number of people. John’s lords desert him for their sworn enemy, Louis of France, but Hubert warns John that the common people of England are disturbed by the rumors as well:

Old men and beldams in the streets

Do prophesy upon it dangerously.

Young Arthur’s death is common in their mouths,

And when they talk of him, they shake their heads  
And whisper one another in the ear.  
And he that speaks doth grip the hearer's wrist  
Whilst he that hears makes fearful action  
With wrinkled brows, with nods, with rolling eyes.  
I saw a smith stand with his hammer, thus,  
The whilst his iron did on the anvil cool,  
With open mouth swallowing the tailor's news,  
Who, with his shears and measure in his hand,  
Standing on slippers which his nimble haste  
Had falsely thrust upon contrary feet,  
Told of a many thousand warlike French  
That were embattailéd and ranked in Kent.  
Another lean, unwashed artificer  
Cuts off his tale and talks of Arthur's death. (4.2.185-202)

Despite the fact that the boy did nothing of himself during his short life (he admits to King Philip that he has a “powerless hand” (2.1.15) and plays a passive part his mother defends his claim to the throne), his death causes a larger reaction than anyone could have supposed as his story overpowers even the news of the approaching French army. It is almost as if his death symbolizes something even more terrible than invasion. Providing a suggestion, Elizabeth Harper suggests that children, especially royal children, represent a “dynasty” being “propell[ed]...into a timeless future.” When they are killed, it is proof of a “patriarchy that kills its future in order to assure its present power” (205). In other words, the death of Arthur makes

the people of England realize that they currently have a king who will stop at nothing, including jeopardizing the future of the nation, in order to ensure his current political power.

### **Other “Children” and Mothers in *King John***

Arthur’s death not only role emphasizes the play’s main questions of legitimacy and succession by proving King John’s ineffectiveness as a leader, but his presence is also part of the larger question posed by the play as to who is allowed to have power. In answering this question, *King John* focuses specifically on three groups that society disempowers – women, bastards and children – and challenges the audience’s assumptions about how power is distributed.

The play allegorizes the question of legitimacy through the parallel situations of King John and Arthur and the Faulconbridge brothers. Where other Histories steer clear of symbols and symbolic characters, *King John* recalls an earlier trend of allegory in history plays in the figure of the Bastard. Alaina Bupp, for example, claims that the Bastard figure starts out with a specific identity, but progressively becomes more allegorical through his choice to be solely defined by his status as Richard Couer-de-lion’s illegitimate offspring (8). As such, she argues, the Bastard “speaks to the illegitimatized, under-appreciated, and under-estimated in us all” (13). James Saeger agrees that the Bastard becomes more allegorical, but argues that the Bastard also introduces the notion that characters could “create a self based...upon action” instead of accepting inherited names and properties, thereby emphasizing the necessity for performance in order to keep one’s chosen identity (2). The Bastard’s theatrical character thus introduces the idea of performance that is so common amongst History plays, albeit in legitimate heirs to the throne, and drawing attention to fact that he does so within a performance.

*King John* subtly questions the wisdom of choosing monarchs based solely on patriarchal bloodlines. Arthur, the rightful heir to the throne, is only a child and is used by his mother and the French court to gain power in England. King John proves himself in the course of the play to be an ineffective, indecisive and immoral ruler. The Bastard, though never explicitly positioned as a possible heir, is doubtless the best suited for the role. He is old enough to make his own decisions, able to see past the tricky rhetoric of the noblemen and call them out on their bluffs, successful as a warrior as well as a leader in battle, and establishes his own humanity in the scene where he comes upon Arthur's dead body, condemning Hubert in the strongest language for murdering a child. He is also the character with whom the audience most identifies, drawing us in with his devil-may-care comedy and impassioned speeches. The audience knows that Bastard cannot inherit the throne despite his connection to Richard I, but his presence encourages the audience to question the system that would rather have either an inexperienced, powerless child or a fickle king over a man with all the talents the other History plays claim are necessary to be a king, lacking only a sanctioned pedigree.

The children in history plays, like those in *A Chaste Maid*, reveal themselves to be the source of their parent's power. However, *A Chaste Maid* deals with children who are mainly in the middle and lower classes, so their power is primarily social. The children in history plays, however, are all potential heirs to the throne. As discussed in the previous chapter, children in Tragedy can add to their parents' political power as well as their social status but unlike the children in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, who make their mother more likeable, the children in *King John* expose their mothers as power-hungry tyrants who hide behind their role as a mother in order to gain power for themselves. Since history plays are centered on the right of succession through the patriarchal system, women should technically not play a central role.

After all, as Howard states, “The crown passes lineally from father to son; women are vehicles for this reproductive continuity” (“Shakespearean History” 626). However, many critics have noted the unusually powerful women figures present across the History plays, and this characteristic is especially notable in *King John*. Emma Smith, for example, points out that “[t]he Bastard, Arthur and John are “all three...fatherless sons shaped by dominate female influence” (“*King John*” 0:13:35). I would argue that the women in this play are, as are most of not all of the women in History, powerful because of and through their roles as mothers.

In the first scene of *King John*, Queen Eleanor, King John’s mother, plays an active role in the discussions of the court. She scoffs at the messenger’s wording when he asserts that King John is not the legitimate king, upbraids Robert Faulconbridge for questioning his mother’s virtue, suggests to her son the connection between the elder Faulconbridge, Philip, and Richard Coeur-de-Lion, then extends an offer of kinship to Philip instead of the inheritance that King John has just awarded him. She is certainly aware that her power is derived from her son’s position, as evidenced by her remark to him that his throne is his by “possession much more than your right,/ Or else it must go wrong with you and me;/ So much my conscience whispers in your ear,/ Which none but heaven, and you, and I, shall hear” (1.1.40-44). She acknowledges the connection between her own position and her son’s, yet her speech immediately preceding this hypocritically accuses Arthur’s mother Constance for taking advantage of that connection with her own son: “Have I not ever said/ How that ambitious Constance would not cease/ Till she had kindled France and all the world/ Upon the right and party of her own son” (1.1.31-34).

Constance plays a similar role in the French court, not only badgering King Philip and Louis to defend her son’s claim to the English throne, but also advising the king to “[s]tay for an answer to [his] embassy,/ Lest unadvised you stain swords with blood” (2.1.44-5). Clearly, these women

have no trouble speaking up for themselves and asserting their will, even at the highest levels of power. Constance claims that her actions are all to protect her son's rights, but Eleanor makes no such claim, instead implicitly acknowledging her own self-interest where the monarchy is concerned. The root of these women's power, and indeed the power of the other mothers in History plays, is emphasized when they lose it. To be more precise, the mothers lose their power when they lose their children. Constance, for example, loses all credibility with the French court after Arthur's capture. They tell her to "go away" (3.4.20), that she "utters madness" (3.4.43), and, after listening to her moving speech about the loss of her child, orders her to "bind up those tresses" (3.4.61). The king and other members of the court no longer respect her authority; her claim to it disappears with Arthur.

## **Conclusion**

While Histories deals with a king's right to rule, this genre generally addresses the question in terms of an adult's rhetorical ability while drawing heavily from sources without children. *King John* focuses instead on questioning the patriarchal line of ascension, and so introduces Arthur, another patriarchally legitimate contender to the throne, as a comparison to John. It is this comparison that unfavorably demonstrates how the "legitimate" options for reigning monarchs are not necessarily the best choices.

While *The Life and Death of King John* does not fit the traditional model of a History play, its inclusion of Arthur's death brings the play nearer to a tragedy. Danson argues that while "History contains many tragic events...ultimately it has a happy ending, since it is the ending appointed by God" (105). In general, audiences are supposed to come out of the play feeling like

justice has been served and that all is right with the world, but the onstage death of young Arthur, or indeed any of the children of history plays, makes that unlikely.

## CONCLUSION: Little Exceptions of Genre

Children were largely excluded from early modern Comedies, Tragedies, and Histories.

Shakespeare, Middleton, Jonson, Marlowe and other Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights explored the various relationships of the family in great depth, but almost always with adult characters because children would complicate each genre's purpose. Children in comedies would most likely come from outside of wedlock. In a conservative genre that aims to correct such errant sexuality, an illegitimate child, proof that someone had broken the laws upholding the patriarchy, would extend the play's phase of deviant behavior indefinitely into the future. Similarly in Tragedy, children represent the possibility of a future. Since tragedies effectively destroy any possibility of a future or legacy for their characters, the children must die in order to make the destruction of an individual's will complete. Histories dwelt on the question of proper conduct for kings, drawing heavily from sources that did not often include children.

Despite the generic reasons why children were excluded from each of these genres, some child characters did appear on the early modern stage. They draw attention to themselves precisely because they do not usually appear, but they also draw attention to the reasons why they do not usually appear. Danson claims that stories are understood based on "the extent to which it conforms to or diverges from previous generic practice" (5), but I would add that conformity and divergence also encourages the audience to understand something about the nature of genre. Frow states, "If setting and genre are metacommunicative frames in relation to texts, texts are always potentially metacommunications about their frames" (17). Texts are always metacommunicative about their genres whether they uphold its conventions or not, but when they do not, it encourages readers to think about the conventions that do exist. Children, as anomalies in early modern plays, encourage discussion about why they are not regularly included

in any of the main genres, but they also question the core themes, purposes, values, and assumptions that structure those genres.

In this thesis, I have explored the interconnectedness of genre and children in Renaissance plays, but there are still important questions to explore. In this survey, I explored the question with plays that are well known to critics, but a wider survey of plays, including lesser known plays, within each genre would give a broader perspective of the various ways children were incorporated into plays as well as how they complicated each genre. As I demonstrated in the Introduction, scholars have shown interest in the ways children were treated in early modern drama, but more work needs to focus on the connection between genre and child characters because, as my thesis has aimed to demonstrate, genres shape when and where children were employed on stage. The genre of “Romance” in particular would make an interesting study because it includes a lot more child characters than any of the other genres. As I mentioned in the Introduction, I excluded the genre of Romance from my study because it was not a recognized genre during the early modern period in England. Nevertheless, it is worth recognizing that post-Renaissance critics recognized that several of Shakespeare’s plays seemed generically different, and called these plays “Romances.” One hallmark of plays like *The Winter’s Tale* (c. 1623) and *Pericles* (c. 1607-8) is that they include children, which reinforces my point that plays with children often defy expected generic conventions and boundaries more generally.

This point, that children emerge from and contest generic conventions, raises one final take away from this thesis, and this concerns how scholars use literature as historical evidence. Scholars need to be wary of the conclusions they draw about the history of children when they look at the evidence of literature from a particular time. The theoretical modes and questions encouraged in new historicist criticism encourages us to consider literature a historical artifact,

one that can help us to gain a sense of how certain ideas and notions of identity were constructed in and circulated within a particular historical period. Yet my study shows that, at least when it comes to children, the way that they are represented is largely determined by generic conventions. It is true that plays can provide some insight into historical trends. The children in *A Chaste Maid*, for instance, seem to reflect larger concerns about the rapidly expanding population in London. But children in Renaissance plays – their presence or absence, the way that they are loved or abandoned, the ways that they live and die – tend to be shaped or to respond more to generic conventions than early modern reality.

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