Richard III's Baby Teeth

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I. PERILS OF THE PARLOUS

Richard III and his brother's widow, Queen Elizabeth, agree on very little, particularly when it comes to children. It is thus surprising that in the first quarto of Shakespeare's *Richard III* they use the same word to describe the young Duke of York, not as a pawn but as participant in his immediate family's downfall and his uncle's. Both characters declare York "a perilous boy" when he wittily attacks Uncle Richard.[1] York turns Richard's taunt about the boy's growth spurt, "Small herbs have grace; great weeds do grow apace" (2.4.13),[2] into a means of ridiculing Richard's contradictory stories of his own bizarre birth and growth. York's mother responds briskly to her son's taunts: "A perilous boy! Go to, you are too shrewd" (2.4.35).[3] In the very next scene, York challenges Richard's assumptions about childhood growth to his face, teases his uncle about his physical deformities and, most pointedly, asks for a dagger. This exchange prompts Richard's own declaration of the boy's "perilous" nature (3.1.154). In both instances, the little boy may seem more imperiled than perilous, as he is on the brink of being taken from his mother in the first scene and about to disappear into the tower forever in the next. This apparent weakness is evident in Elizabeth's repeated emphasis on York and his older brother, Edward V, as innocent victims and in Richard's assumption that the boys will be easy to dispatch. However, the "perilous" linguistic convergence between these two enemies indicates the brothers pose a threat to Richard not simply as genealogical impediments to his reign but as perceptive, verbally chal-

1. William Shakespeare, *The tragedy of King Richard the third*, Q1 (London, 1597; accessed via Huntington Library, Early English Books Online), sig. E4v and F3r.

2. All quotations of Shakespeare, unless otherwise noted, are from *The Complete Works*, gen. ed. Stephen Orgel and A. R. Braunmuller, The New Pelican Text (New York: Pelican Group, 2002). Here specifically *The Tragedy of King Richard the Third*, ed. Peter Holland.

3. Here I retain the Q1 reading.

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lenging opponents. Richard's encounters with his nephews serve to expose, and ultimately undermine, his political strategy of childlike self-presentation.

The "biting jest[s]" (2.4.30) of Shakespeare's literal child characters allude to the basis for Richard's own vicious bite, which is frequently noted by his adversaries. As Margaret warns: "when he bites / His venom tooth will rankle to the death" (1.3.290–91). The story that Richard was born with teeth is one of many contradictory versions of his accelerated childhood growth and unnaturally prolonged gestation. Richard appropriates these conflicting tales and additional paradoxical ideas about childhood extant during the early modern period to build a vexed but powerful developmental narrative. Shakespeare creates in Richard a character that tries to use the perilous childhood agency demonstrated by his nephews to enable his own political rise, deploying Henry VI–inflected claims of childlike innocence alongside assertions of innate villainy. I argue that Richard III's baby teeth serve to authorize his transgression of moral, familial, and generational bounds. As Marjorie Garber notes, he tries to be "his own parent and his own author"; he appropriates stories in an effort to reproduce himself as a man-child born to be king.[4] However, this tactical reliance on a volatile subject position that encompasses personal risk even as it imperils enemies leaves him susceptible to his probing nephews. As children themselves, the princes are uniquely able to identify and question the inconsistencies within Richard's persona. Shakespeare uses his child characters to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of their uncle's childlike self-presentation. Even after their murders, and before their actual appearance as ghosts, the princes haunt Richard as he scrambles to maintain postures of both childhood and kingship.

The ambiguities intrinsic to both Richard's personal narrative and the princes' perilous situation appear in the textual confusion surrounding the descriptions of little York. While Elizabeth and Richard use the same term to characterize him in the first quarto, this agreement is contested in subsequent editions. The words used to characterize York differ among the Folio, the six previously printed quartos, and the two subsequent quartos.[5] "Parlous" is a variant of "perilous," and thus their definitions may seem so alike as to make the selection of

4. Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare's Ghost Writers: Literature as Uncanny Casualty* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 35.

5. Q1 (1597), sig. E4v and F3r; Elizabeth's word for describing York becomes "parlous" (r5v) in the Folio (1623); her word returns to "perilous" (E4r) in Q7 (1629), while Richard's becomes "perlous" (F3v). Spellings vary throughout. See *The Tragedy of King Richard III*, Q1–8 (London, 1597, 1598, 1602, 1605, 1612, 1622, 1629, 1634; accessed via Huntington and Folger Libraries, Early English Books Online); Charles Hinman, ed., *The First Folio of Shakespeare: The Norton Facsimile*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 1740, TLN 1523.

one or the other an unimportant distinction. While parlous may be understood as the gentler term, it can mean "dangerously cunning or clever." The first definition of perilous is similar: "dangerous, hazardous, fraught with peril."[6] However, the distinction does matter to multiple modern editors who set out to justify their decisions to retain the terms from their copy text, commonly the Folio, or to emend them. These choices reflect and direct interpretations of the princes in the tower. For example, even though Janis Lull's New Cambridge edition is a strictly Folio version, she still takes time to explain why Richard's word is "perilous" and not "parlous": "Some editors follow Q7–8 in tidying up the metre by using 'parlous' here, but a distinction seems deliberately drawn between Elizabeth's word, which suggests that York's tongue will get his family in trouble, and Richard's, which means that York is dangerous to him."[7] Lull may simply be differentiating herself from her New Cambridge predecessor, John Dover Wilson, and from Antony Hammond's Arden edition. Both align Elizabeth and Richard by selecting "parlous" for the later.[8] Yet in his Pelican edition, Peter Holland, like Lull, adds a justification for maintaining the Folio reading, noting: "parlous [is] the more usual form, but Richard's use of the stronger form may be intentional here."[9] If this were simply a case of more recent editorial fidelity to the Folio text topping a prior trend for emending from post-Folio quartos, why all of the emphasis on definitions, deliberation, and character intent?

This perhaps minor editorial crux reflects the difficulty of defining the threat that young York poses throughout the play, given the many descriptions and comparisons applied to him. The resultant interpretive variations, in turn, color Richard's retellings of his own infancy. Lull uses Elizabeth's "parlous" to stress the possibility that York may simply be a danger to his family, in his innocence saying things that have consequences he cannot comprehend. This editorial emphasis contributes to the frequent reading of either form of Elizabeth's exclama-

6. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "parlous," def. 1, and "perilous," def. 1.a., http://www.oed.com. Adrian Kiernander proposes an explanation for the seemingly indifferent variations between Q1 and the Folio in "'Betwixt' and 'Between': Variant Readings in the Folio and First Quarto Versions of *Richard III* and W. W. Greg's Concept of Memorial Reconstruction," in *Shakespeare Matters: History, Teaching, Performance*, ed. Lloyd Davis (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 2003), 239–53. On variation between dictionary definitions of words and Shakespeare's potential understandings of them, see Margreta De Grazia, "Homonyms before and after Lexical Standardization," *Deutsche Shakespeare-Gesellschaft West: Jahrbuch* (1990): 143–56.

7. Janis Lull, ed., *King Richard III*, The New Cambridge Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 123, 3.1.155n.

8. John Dover Wilson, ed., *King Richard III*, The New Cambridge Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954); Antony Hammond, ed., *King Richard III*, The Arden Shakespeare (New York: Methuen, 1981), 218n.

9. Holland, *Richard the Third*, 931n.

tion as a serious reprimand of her son's wit.[10] However, it is just as likely to be a rueful, yet proud, recognition of his cleverness. While also adhering to the Folio, Holland stresses a different interpretive possibility—that Richard's identification of the "perilous boy" may be a deliberate use of "the stronger form." As such, it serves to recognize the significant danger York poses to his uncle. Such editorial decisions create a picture of York's imperiled yet perilous position as potentially both weak and threatening, both innocent and shrewd, that exemplifies the unsettling agency he and his brother exercise in their encounters with Richard. Although the princes in the tower and their Clarence cousins are repeatedly described by the adult characters as innocent lambs, they also appear as weeds and apes, pests and mimics, able to avoid definition even if they cannot escape death. Richard appropriates, and eventually must contend with, this variety.

The childhood attributes Shakespeare uses to construct his title character do not derive solely from the numerous child characters in the drama. The playwright also draws on the foundational and yet unsettling roles played by child figures in early modern culture. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century children could be understood as both innately innocent and sinful, as lacking reason yet skillfully imitating it, and as embodying connections to the past and future.[11] In attempts to make sense of these and other paradoxical possibilities, writers in both fictional and didactic contexts frequently strove to explain and categorize children through vivid comparisons. In treatises on pedagogy, courtesy, and household management, children appear as imitative monkeys, pliant branches, virulent weeds, and weapons aimed at parental enemies. For example, in a single passage of *A godlie forme of householde government*, John Dod and Robert Cleaver offer extremely contradictory advice on raising godly children. They compare children to staffs for parents to lean on, to supple branches that parents must bend into shape, and to arrows: "Arrowes are an excellent

10. For this argument, see Catherine Belsey, "Little Princes: Shakespeare's Royal Children," in *Shakespeare and Childhood*, ed. Kate Chedgzoy, Susanne Greenhalgh, and Robert Shaughnessy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 32–48, esp. 45; Michael Witmore, *Pretty Creatures: Children and Fiction in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 146; Morriss Henry Partee, *Childhood in Shakespeare's Plays* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 54.

11. See, e.g., Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos, *Adolescence and Youth in Early Modern England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 12–14; Paul Griffiths, *Youth and Authority: Formative Experiences in England, 1560–1640* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 34–36; Mark A. Heberle, "'Innocent Prate': *King John* and Shakespeare's Children," in *Infant Tongues: The Voice of the Child in Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Goodenough, Mark A. Heberle, and Naomi Sokoloff (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 28–43, esp. 29, 31; Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Children* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 102, 123–24; Keith Thomas, "Children in Early Modern England," in *Children and Their Books: A Celebration of the Work of Iona and Peter Opie*, ed. Gillian Avery and Julia Briggs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 45–77.

weapon of defence . . . Euen so children godly brought vp, are a special protection and defence to their parents."[12] These cases exemplify the combinations of passivity and danger, flexibility and firmness possible within the complex of early modern ideas about childhood.[13] If children are not brought up quite correctly, those arrows could threaten to harm, rather than defend, their parents. This perilous multiplicity is further developed in the child characters populating *Richard III*. Child figures can fall into multiple categories at once, and this boundary-crossing ability enables Richard to sidestep his enemies' attacks and to transgress the limitations of appropriate adult and kingly behavior. The absence of a manageable understanding of children also potentially complicates the process of maturation. A straightforward trajectory from youth to old age becomes problematic when childhood provides such an uncertain starting point. Richard's strategy in the play similarly complicates linear progressions. Shakespeare loops Richard's developmental narrative back on itself as the character strives to rewrite and reconfigure his infancy. Richard skews temporal trajectories ranging from childhood growth to lineal inheritance in order to facilitate his rise to power.

The perilous—and parlous—princes in the tower embody many of the variations of childhood that their uncle appropriates. Their combination of dangerous agency and weakness exemplifies both why childhood is useful to Richard in the first place and why it becomes a threat to him. In building his persona and political strategy on the unstable foundation of early modern childhood, Richard acquires useful multiplicity but also makes himself vulnerable. Edward and York render their uncle's developmental narrative untenable and so facilitate the collapse of his self-image and his defeat.

II. TEETHING: RICHARD'S CONTRADICTORY VERSIONS OF CHILDHOOD

Richard III, indeed the entire first tetralogy, is populated by child figures. These are both child characters and adults associated linguistically with childhood. The literal children include Edward V and little York, the seemingly ineffectual Clarence children, Rutland, and the earlier Edward, Prince of Wales (son of Henry VI). Shakespeare also characterizes multiple adult monarchs as children. Henry VI's perpetual innocence makes his inheritance of the crown at nine

12. Robert Cleaver and John Dod, *A godlie forme of householde government: For the ordering of private families, according to the direction of Gods word* (London: Thomas Man, 1612), Q3v–4r.

13. Joseph Campana writes of "the potent ambiguity of the child" (1) in "Shakespeare's Children", *Literature Compass* 81, no. 1 (2011): 1–14. Andrea Immel and Michael Witmore stress "the child's amphibious nature" (5) in their introduction to *Children and Children's Books in Early Modern Europe, 1550–1800* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

months old a continuously relevant facet of his kingship. The childlike Henry VI prophesies Henry VII's reign when the future king is himself a child, a link Shakespeare reiterates to color the Richmond's ascendancy.

The most prominent of the adult characters the playwright relates to childhood is Richard III. With so many child figures vying for power, the third citizen has good reason to declare: "Woe to that land that's governed by a child" (2.3.11). While the citizen overtly refers to young Edward V, he also quotes a verse from Ecclesiastes that warns against irresponsible adult monarchs as much as it cautions against child rulers: "Woe to thee, O land, when thy king is a child and thy princes eat in the morning."[14] The connotations of the scripture facilitate interpreting the citizen's line as an allusion to Richard, who really will govern the land. This possibility is evident in the exchange that precedes the citizens' conversation. Richard concludes the previous scene by claiming, "I, as a child, will go by thy direction" (2.2.153). While Richard and Buckingham are overtly discussing arrangements for Edward, the placement of Richard's self-identification calls attention not only to the child character but also to his own pose as a child figure.

Richard dwells repeatedly on the contrary stories of his gestation and birth, and he uses them to strengthen his political position. He notes the uncertain length of time spent in his mother's womb, either too long or too little, "so long a-growing and so leisurely" (2.4.19) and yet also "sent before my time / Into these breathing world, scarce half made up" (1.1.20–21).[15] In addition to this paradoxically fast and slow growth, he presents his personality as both determined by the nature of his birth and made malleable by it. Richard describes himself as born ready to fight and to command and as "an unlicked bear whelp / That carries no impression like the dam" (*3 Henry VI*, 3.3.161–62). Of course, these stories do not originate with Richard. He acknowledges that his first "impression" of them came from others, notably his mother. Richard is also not the first character to bring up his unusual birth; Henry VI does so before his death. Other characters retell Richard's own childhood, particularly early moments he cannot remember, in order to attack his physical appearance and

14. Ecclesiastes 10:16. The term is "child" in the Geneva, Douay-Rheims, and King James Bibles, but in contemporary translations, it tends to be "servant." This variation underlines the applicability of the verse and the line to Richard III, as well as to Edward V.

15. John Rous was the first to attribute a two-year gestation and prenatal teeth to Richard. Sir Thomas More adds the claim that he was born feet first. See Alison Hanham, ed. and trans., *Richard III and His Early Historians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975): 104–5, 120–21, 164–65. On the interaction between memory, oral tradition, and written history in the construction of Richard's monstrosity, see Philip Schwyzer, "Lees and Moonshine: Remembering Richard III, 1485–1635," *Renaissance Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2010): 850–83.

personal qualities. This tactic hints at the rhetorical power accessible through interpreting both individual childhoods and cultural understandings of childhood. In Richard, Shakespeare creates a character that amplifies this existing discourse not only by reclaiming and reinterpreting the stories of his birth but also by embracing all of their contradictory manifestations. Shakespeare infuses Richard's retellings with the multiplicity of early modern views of childhood. Richard adopts his enemies' worst opinions of him but authorizes so many possibilities at once that even blows that strike a target cannot account for all the other aspects of his persona. Like a many-headed hydra, Richard avoids containment in a single definition and retains numerous angles from which to strike back. Richard's childlike self-presentation does more than make him a moving target; he also uses his physical differences and their bizarre origins as political weapons. Marjorie Garber argues, "Richard turns his chaotic physical condition into a rhetorical benefit."[16] Indeed, he combines both his current appearance and the reworked tales of his youthful past into justifications for ruthless and canny stratagems.

In *3 Henry VI*, Richard first accepts tales of prenatal teething, a move that both justifies his violent actions and protects him from scathing verbal assaults. Richard's infant bite may also be an indicator of early rhetorical strengths.[17] As Henry VI faces death, he declares: "Teeth hadst thou in thy head when thou wast born, / To signify thou cam'st to bite the world" (*3 Henry VI*, 5.6.53–54). In response, Richard recounts a version of his birth in which his swift, potentially premature arrival indicates eagerness to take on the enemy:

> For I have often heard my mother say
> I came into the world with my legs forward.
> Had I not reason, think ye, to make haste,
> And seek their ruin that usurped our right?
> (*3 Henry VI*, 5.6.70–73)

He appropriates the tales of his mother and her attendants for his own ends and glosses versions of childhood for his benefit. But what frightens the mid-

16. Garber, *Shakespeare's Ghost Writers*, 35; on the formation of Richard's physical deformity as a figure for his internal monstrosity, see also Ian Frederick Moulton, "'A Monster Great Deformed': The Unruly Masculinity of Richard III," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (1996): 251–68, esp. 261; Greta Olson, "Richard III's Animalistic Criminal Body," *Philological Quarterly* 82, no. 3 (2003): 301–24.

17. Bartholomaeus Anglicus asserts that incomplete dentition results in poor speech in *Batman vppon Bartholome, his booke De proprietatibus rerum, newly corrected, enlarged and amended*, ed. and trans. Stephen Bateman (London: Thomas East, 1582), N4v.

wife and the other women are those teeth, a reaction he stresses with relish: "'O, Jesus bless us, he is born with teeth!'— / And so I was, which plainly signified / That I should snarl and bite and play the dog" (*3 Henry VI*, 5.6.76–78). The assertion that a breech birth signifies a hasty nature contrasts with the "leisurely" quality indicated by the claim that Richard was in the womb so long that he developed teeth, yet these contradictory elements combine in his murder of Henry VI. This amalgamation indicates the power Richard acquires through embracing and manipulating the tales of his birth. Acknowledging his own bite also serves to deflect criticism and cursing. When Margaret and Elizabeth charge Richard with the wolfish ravening of Henry VI, his son Edward, and the princes in the tower, their horror echoes that which Richard attributes to the women attendant at his birth. Because such revulsion is incorporated into Richard's fluid origin story, their accusations do not undermine his authority.

When Richard's mother, the Duchess of York, directly castigates him with her own narrative of his birth and growth, it does not trouble him. This is both because Richard has already reconfigured her stories of his childhood and because the Duchess relies on a linear trajectory to describe Richard's life and the progress of his evil nature. Shakespeare gives Richard a conglomeration of contradictory tales that undermine such a straightforward assertion of causality. The Duchess recounts:

> A grievous burden was thy birth to me;
> Tetchy and wayward was thy infancy;
> Thy schooldays frightful, desp'rate, wild, and furious;
> Thy prime of manhood daring, bold, and venturous;
> Thy age confirmed, proud, subtle, sly, and bloody
> (4.4.168–72)

In her version of Richard's ages of man, his stages follow one after another with a clear, inevitable end in wrack and ruin that is not evident to those around Richard earlier in the tetralogy. The Duchess sees that her son is ruthless and underhanded, but she links all of these qualities in a direct causal line stretching back before his birth. However, Richard's developmental narrative diverges markedly from these predictable steps. Shakespeare's multiple versions of Richard's infancy destabilize the starting point of this restrictive chronological progression into manhood.

Rather than asserting a succession of stages, Richard deploys tales of childhood based on his immediate political needs, drawing convenient links between his birth, body, and fitness for rule. For example, he connects his hunchback, the "envious mountain on my back" (*3 Henry IV*, 3.2.157) to his gifts of military prowess and political cunning. His deformed shoulder enables the heavy physi-

cal and mental effort necessary to attain his goal: "This shoulder was ordained so thick to heave; / And heave it shall some weight or break my back" (*3 Henry VI*, 5.7.22–23). He takes the weight of governance on that same back: "Since you will buckle fortune on my back, / To bear her burden, whe'er I will or no, / I must have patience to endure the load" (*Richard III*, 3.7.227–29). Although in these examples Richard employs contradictory stories that differentiate him from the perpetually infantile Henry VI, Shakespeare also incorporates some of Henry's most identifiable qualities within the complex of childhoods used by Richard.

Throughout the *Henry VI* plays, Henry's innocence and honesty in political matters are associated both with his piety and with a childlike dependency on others. As with Richard's later victims, the princes in the tower, Shakespeare tropes such innocence with images of lambs led to slaughter. When the women of *Richard III* term Richard a dog and a wolf, they also label the princes, as in Elizabeth's exclamation: "Wilt thou, O God, fly from such gentle lambs / And throw them in the entrails of the wolf?" (4.4.22–23).[18] Shortly before his own murder, Henry VI identifies himself as both shepherd and lamb: "So flies the reckless shepherd from the wolf; / So first the harmless sheep doth yield his fleece," (*3 Henry VI*, 5.6.7–8).[19] This association with shepherds and lambs casts Henry as a Christlike figure and supports his reputation, alive and dead, as "a holy king" (*Richard III*, 1.2.5). It also emphasizes his passivity and lack of political savvy. Henry's own words and those of others make him the embodiment of holy innocence and its connection with childhood. As Greta Olson notes, through Shakespeare's language the princes also acquire an aura of holiness and an association with Christ.[20] This innocent aspect of childhood is one of many possibilities available to Richard.

Some of Richard's most prominent, and ludicrous, childish posturing emphasizes Henry-like innocence and openness. It surfaces when Richard woos Anne, claiming that only she can reduce him to childhood, her beauty drawing from his eyes a "store of childish drops" (1.2.158), while in the face of battle he is all manly firmness. Richard particularly poses as a child when asserting his own supposed incapacity for political machinations. He emphasizes innocence and holiness as qualities innate to children as yet unsoiled by the world. These qualities are also useful to Richard as he asserts his fitness for kingship, and in appropriating them he clearly references Henry VI. When Richard declares, "I am too childish-foolish for this world" (1.3.142), he contrasts his own "soft and

18. See also 4.4.50.
19. For Henry VI's desire to be a shepherd, see *3 Henry VI*, 1.5.
20. Olson, "Animalistic Criminal Body," 312–13.

pitiful" (141), and thus malleable and ingenuous, heart with Edward IV's cruelty toward Clarence.

Richard's strategies for attaining power are clearly dependent on a contradictory array of childhoods. He portrays himself in various guises of childhood to attack and evade his adversaries. He also deploys tales of childhood, independent from his own persona, to combat those enemies—adults and children alike. For example, despite the fact that Richard is clearly not averse to killing children, he invokes the death of Rutland and cites it as the source of Margaret's subsequent misery.[21] He reiterates the story of how she used Rutland's death to provoke tears from the Duke of York, invoking innocent childhood to rout Margaret's attack.[22] Richard also tries to fit individual children into restrictive boxes—youthful innocence and rigid stages of growth—attempting to deny them the perilous multiplicity he utilizes himself. He works to rhetorically categorize the princes in the tower, and when that fails, he kills them.

III. WEEDS AND HERBS: RICHARD PRUNED BY HIS NEPHEWS

The narrow classifications Richard tries to apply to children are not so different from some scholarly interpretations of Shakespeare's child characters. The princes in the tower and their Clarence cousins are often categorized as sweet innocents, as iterations of their murdered young uncle, Rutland, and as useful affective tools. They evoke pity and, as Ann Blake asserts in the princes' case, function as a means of turning audiences against Richard in time for his defeat.[23] However, I argue that the encounter between the children and their uncle is as dangerous for Richard as it is for them. "Little prating York['s]" (3.2.151) verbal dexterity has also resulted critically in his being classed, at best, not with the holy, innocent Shakespearean children but rather with the overly precocious, unrealistic ones.[24] At worst, in the "careful balance . . . to be struck between precociousness and obnoxiousness" York leans toward the later.[25] An-

21. Richard kills Henry VI and his son and declares his intent to murder his nephews at *3 Henry VI*, 5.7.31–34.

22. See 1.3.177–80. Margaret taunts the Duke of York at *3 Henry VI*, 1.4.

23. Ann Blake, "Children and Suffering in Shakespeare's Plays," *Yearbook of English Studies* 23 (1993): 293–304. Belsey associates many of the child characters with Rutland (37). Witmore argues that child figures serve as pathetic theatrical devices (141).

24. For responses to criticisms of precocious children as unrealistic, see: Heberle, "Innocent Prate," 29; Leah S. Marcus, *Childhood and Cultural Despair: A Theme and Variations in Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1978), 7, 28.

25. Richard Madelaine, "Material Boys: Apprenticeships and the Boy Actors' Shakespearean Roles," in Davis, *Shakespeare Matters*, 30.

tony Hammond calls York, "a most thoroughly dislikeable brat."[26] In his irritation with York, Hammond seems to discern York and Edward's persistent ability to disturb Richard's self-image. The princes serve not to attack particular elements of Richard's paradoxical persona, as Margaret does, but rather to identify the disjunctive construction of that persona. Further, the disparity between Richard's embrace of childhood multiplicity for his own political purposes and his inability to cope with it in literal child characters precipitates his fall.

The first words of young Richard, Duke of York, immediately raise questions about his uncle's assertions regarding childhood growth. This is the first indication of the elder Richard's efforts to contain his perilous nephews within restrictive trajectories of development. York initially seems willing to accept his uncle's words, expressing a wish to grow more slowly because of his uncle's aphorism: "'Small herbs have grace; great weeds do grow apace' / And since, methinks, I would not grow so fast / Because sweet flowers are slow, and weeds make haste" (2.4.13–15). Given Richard's variable retellings of his own birth and growth, with this trope, Shakespeare brings the character's self-presentation into focus. The Duchess of York notes that this standard of slow growth equaling gentleness did not hold for Richard himself, not because of his prenatal teething but because he was "So long a-growing and so leisurely / That, if his rule were true, he should be gracious" (19–20). York answers his grandmother by coming up with a "flout" (24) unrelated to her account of Richard's development:

> Marry, they say my uncle grew so fast
> That he could gnaw a crust at two hours old:
> 'Twas full two years ere I could get a tooth.
> Grandam, this would have been a biting jest!
> (2.4.27–30)

In this exchange, Shakespeare introduces another Richard, a child as capable of wordplay as his uncle. York turns Richard's words against him and appropriates his uncle's sharp baby teeth for his own use.

Richard's weeds and herbs taunt asserts a rigid paradigm for children that he cannot and does not apply to his own contradictory persona. It exemplifies his efforts to clearly define and contain the child characters that surround him. The figurative depiction of children as plants and of parents and teachers as gardeners is a prominent trope in period pedagogical and child-rearing

26. Hammond, *King Richard III*, 111. For a similarly irritated response to Shakespeare's child characters, see Marjorie Garber, *Coming of Age in Shakespeare* (London: Methuen, 1981), 30.

texts.[27] "The polycie of a wyse and cunnynge gardener" was recommended by, among others, Sir Thomas Elyot, Roger Ascham, and Richard Mulcaster.[28] It could be used to conceptualize children as passive plants under the nurturing and disciplinary control of adults. Like the trope of children as innocent lambs, this is one of many ways that early modern thinkers attempted to naturalize conceptually unruly child figures. However, these figurative strategies only serve to underline the writers' anxiety about childhood multiplicity and the uncertain futures it harbors. With the weeds and herbs maxim, Shakespeare indicates that Richard shares this anxiety, at least with regard to his child adversaries. Rather than imposing limits, it reveals that his flexible self-construction strategy has limitations. Just as Henry VI and Margaret's attempts to use Richard's baby teeth against him backfire, so does assuming that nephews can be controlled like plants, indeed that plants can be controlled at all, as many frustrated gardeners would attest.

York also appropriates narrative sources that Richard bends to suit himself. Richard attributes versions of his birth and growth to his mother, the midwife, and the ladies present at his birth. When the Duchess presses the prince on the source for his "flout," he cites Richard's nurse. According to the Duchess, this is impossible: "Why, she was dead ere thou wast born" (2.4.33). York then declares: "If 'twere not she, I cannot tell who told me" (34). Both Richards are essentially relying on hearsay and creating the information they want. Both confuse the chronology of events as they retell what they cannot possibly know for themselves.[29] York's explanation, or rather his refusal to give one, also contradicts interpretations of his verbosity as uncontrolled and therefore dangerous. The boy's "cannot" may be read as ignorance about the origins of his information. However, the line also works as a refusal to disclose his source for the flout, demonstrating his ability to keep his mouth shut and indicating his control over and awareness of the implications of his words.

As with his younger brother, Edward V's first appearance on stage demonstrates his ability to see through his uncle's tactical combination of childhoods. In his first lines, Edward wishes for more uncles—the imprisoned and soon-to-

27. See Griffiths, *Youth and Authority*, 51, 53; Rebecca Bushnell, *A Culture of Teaching: Early Modern Humanism in Theory and Practice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 75–116.

28. Sir Thomas Elyot, *The boke named the Gouernour* ([London]: Thomas Berthelet, 1537), B7r; Roger Ascham, *The scholemaster* (London: John Daye, 1570), e.g., D2v, Fr, F4r; Richard Mulcaster, *Positions* (London: Thomas Vautrollier, 1581), e.g., Fr.

29. Schwyzer links York's words with Edward V's interest in oral and written history and sees them as an indication of the disconnect between memories and their origins ("Lees and Moonshine," 868–69).

be-executed Grey, Rivers, and Vaughn, and the deceased Clarence.[30] Richard's reply reveals his desire to categorize, and ultimately dispose of, his nephew:

> Sweet prince, the untainted virtue of your years
> Hath not yet dived into the world's deceit,
> Nor more can you distinguish of a man
> Than of his outward show. . .
>
> (3.1.7–10)

Richard tries to treat Edward as an "untainted" innocent, something that he himself repeatedly pretends to be. However, the child king discerns the applicability of these words to the uncle who utters them. Although he never presses his disagreements with Richard, Edward does undercut Richard's pretensions to singular linguistic duplicity and manipulative ability. Edward lets his uncle know that, while his murderous purpose will later surprise Buckingham, it is no surprise to his young victims.[31] He uses talk of the tower and its supposed builder, Julius Caesar, to indicate that Richard does not control the story they both inhabit as completely as he supposes.

Edward's focus on the transmission of history demonstrates his awareness of past and present political stakes and of the power possessed by those who tell their own tales. He expresses confidence in oral history but also strongly emphasizes Caesar's control over his own posthumous reputation.[32] Shakespeare gives the prince language stressing Caesar's written works about his own conquests:

> With what his valor did enrich his wit,
> His wit set down to make his valor live.
> Death makes no conquest of this conqueror,
> For now he lives in fame, though not in life.
>
> (3.1.85–88)

The prince outlines the mutually reinforcing interaction between deeds and self-presentation that Shakespeare has made so important for Richard. Edward steps outside of the narrow category in which Richard strives to place him by identifying his uncle's own containment within a story already told. Michael Witmore views Edward as a conduit for history who becomes "a figure for the

30. As Edward refers to his half-brother Grey as an "uncle," I do as well.
31. Evident at 3.1.91, 146–47.
32. See 3.2.75–76.

origin of the story itself."[33] However, as Andreas Höfele notes, Edward predicts Richard's fate as accurately as Margaret does: "Shakespeare's play, combining the modes of the written and the oral, will make his fame, or rather infamy, live 'successively from age to age.' Indeed, he lives in fame *now*, for the predicted future is also the presence of the play's unfolding action."[34] For all Richard's stories, his many versions of childhood, Edward hints at his real lack of control over his own life and life story. He implies that Richard is a kind of anti-Caesar, aiming to rule England but doomed to fail, seemingly in control of his own play but really written by others. Margaret, the Duchess of York, and Elizabeth's curses rest on equating Richard's crimes with his prodigious birth and misshapen body and with particular aspects of Richard's own self-presentation. In contrast, Edward pierces through this composite identity to locate his uncle's weakness. Through Richard's assertions of authority over his own reproduction, Shakespeare reveals the extent of the agency that has slipped through Richard's fingers.

Richard fails to respond to Edward's insinuation that he is not in control of his narrative. Instead, throughout the conversation, he employs strategies of rhetorical naturalization, trying to both pin down and avoid the child king. In asides emphasizing his own verbal facility, Richard predicts the boy's death through a particular view of early modern childhood. First, Richard wryly acknowledges Edward's intelligence, "So wise, they say, do never live long" (3.1.79). Indeed, in the sixteenth century there was substantial concern that gifted children might sicken as a result of excess study. Richard's line is remarkably similar to what physician Laurant Joubert notes as a popular saying: "He was not meant to live, for he was smart." By burdening their minds while not sufficiently exercising their bodies, precocious children could permanently alter their humoral complexions and eventually die.[35] This ominous jest highlights Richard's efforts to impose a rigid view of child development. Here growth has an optimal pace, and variations in that pace have predictable results, authorizing Richard's deadly intervention. Richard's second aside also predicts the unproduc-

33. Witmore, *Pretty Creatures*, 147.

34. Andreas Höfele, "Making History Memorable: More, Shakespeare and Richard III," *Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* 21 (2005): 187–203, esp. 201. On the princes' awareness of history, see also A. J. Piesse, "Character Building: Shakespeare's Children in Context," in Chedgzoy, Greenhalgh, and Shaughnessy, *Shakespeare and Childhood*, 64–79, esp. 65–66, 72–73.

35. Laurant Joubert, *Popular Errors*, trans. Gregory David de Rocher (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989), 163. Mulcaster also especially emphasizes the health risks of study in *Positions*, C2v–4v.

tive fates and impending deaths of precocious children: "Short summers lightly have a forward spring" (94).[36] This restrictive trajectory of maturation recalls the weeds and herbs taunt and the Duchess's deterministic ages of Richard. Also like that earlier taunt, Richard's asides, if applied to the premature version of his birth, predict his own fall.

Upon his arrival, York continues to challenge his uncle's self-contradictions. First, he references the weeds and herbs aphorism: "You said that idle weeds are fast in growth: / The prince my brother hath outgrown me far" (3.1.103–4). York then invites Richard to make his adversarial stance overt by insulting the heir to the throne: "therefore is he idle?" (105). Shakespeare thus opens their exchange by highlighting the conflict between Richard III's efforts to contain his nephews rhetorically and York's resistance through pointing out his uncle's self-contradictions. Even more overtly than his brother, York confronts Richard with the threat of the princes' imminent deaths:

York. I pray you, uncle, give me this dagger.

Richard. My dagger, little cousin? With all my heart.

Prince Edward. A beggar, brother?

York. Of my kind uncle, that I know will give,
And being but a toy, which is no grief to give.

Richard. A greater gift then that I'll give my cousin.

York. A greater gift? O, that's the sword to it.

Richard. Ay, gentle cousin, were it light enough.

York. O, then I see you will part but with light gifts;
In weightier things you'll say a beggar nay.

Richard. It is too weighty for your Grace to wear.

York. I weigh it lightly, were it heavier.

Richard. What, would you have my weapon, little lord?

York. I would, that I might thank you as you call me.

36. Hezekiah [Ezekias] Woodward warns parents: "a forward Spring is quickly blasted." *A sons patrimony and daughters portion* (London: T. Vnderhill, 1643), 24.

RICHARD. How?

YORK. Little. (3.1.110–25)

York engages Richard in language as duplicitous as his own. Richard initially treats his youngest nephew as one who knows not how he condemns himself. However, as York argues his ability to understand the "weighty" threat before him, it is Richard who is caught out by the boy's wordplay. Picking up his brother's term, "beggar," York asserts that despite Richard's language of deference, both boys know they are at his mercy. As Robert Reeder notes, "He can grasp mentally, even if he cannot carry physically, the sword that lies before him."[37] In directing Richard's patronizing "little" back at him, York proves that he can "moralize two meanings in one word" (3.1.83) as well as his uncle. Heather Dubrow notes that this exchange transforms the initial threat "into a statement in which the victim assumes control and asserts victory."[38] Like Richard, York is capable of playing on others' perceptions of his position as a child. Their witty repartee highlights the boy's status as imperiled and perilous; he faces ultimately fatal danger but still undermines his uncle.

York delivers a further blow to Richard's paradoxical developmental narrative, and thus the increasingly shaky foundations of his monarchical ambitions, when he takes up Edward's request that Richard "bear with" him. He continues to stress his own physical appearance while contrasting it with Richard's:

> You mean to bear me, not to bear with me.
> Uncle, my brother mocks both you and me,
> Because that I am little, like an ape,
> He thinks that you should bear me on your shoulders.
> (3.1.128–31)

Shakespeare places York on the distinctive, deformed shoulder with which Richard intends to bear the burden of kingship. Richard's hunchback becomes, at best, a predictor of future piggyback rides, rather than a sign of strength and fitness to rule. The boy almost literally makes a fool out of his uncle, potentially alluding to the tradition of fools carrying monkeys. These lines also evoke the parallel convention of a show bear with an ape on its

37. Robert Reeder, "'You Are Now out of Your Text': The Performance of Precocity on the Early Modern Stage," in *Renaissance Papers 2001*, ed. M. Thomas Hester (New York: Camden House, 2002), 35–44, 39.

38. Heather Dubrow, *Shakespeare and Domestic Loss: Forms of Deprivation, Mourning, and Recuperation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 179.

shoulders, an image that recalls Richard's characterization of himself as "an unlicked bear whelp."[39] York takes advantage of his uncle's assumption of malleability to reshape Richard's persona. As Michael Bristol notes, bears are both "connected with violence, rape, and destruction" and serve as "symbols of nurture and creativity."[40] The playwright invokes both the threat that Richard poses to his nephews and the process of self-creation in which Richard is engaged.

Shakespeare uses York to play with the contemporary conception of children as lacking reason. By comparing himself to an ape, Reeder asserts, York actually reveals his understanding: "a fully formed human intelligence seems to assert itself in the claim to be less than human."[41] Although Buckingham interprets this move as a conciliatory gesture, he still sees it as an example of York's "sharp-provided wit" (3.1.132). Describing children as apes was another figurative strategy used commonly to stress children's imitative strengths while discounting their ability to understand the words they spoke.[42] For example, Richard Greenham argues against parents who do not educate their young children because "at that age they have but an apish imitation."[43] York uses yet another view of childhood, one that generally implies childish ignorance, to demonstrate his own perceptiveness and to further undermine Richard's attempts at classification. He insults, even humiliates, his uncle, but is protected from immediate retaliation by the very ideas of childish innocence and lack of reason that he skewers.

Buckingham and Richard's reactions to the exchange indicate that York's attacks have already begun to weaken his uncle's persona. Shakespeare creates an air of anxiety among the men that remains after the children exit. Buckingham initially compliments York, out of Richard's earshot: "So cunning, and so young, is wonderful" (3.1.135). He then speedily tries to alleviate the sting of York's barbs by claiming that the boy was "incensed by his subtle mother / To taunt and scorn you thus opprobriously?" (152–53). Reeder insists that Buckingham's assertion of ventriloquization must at least be a possibility.[44] However, his quick shift from praise to dismissal suggests a desire to please Rich-

39. See Hammond, *King Richard III*, 217n; Belsey, "Little Princes," 45; Partee, *Childhood in Shakespeare's Plays*, 58; Erica Fudge, *Perceiving Animals: Humans and Beasts in Early Modern Culture* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000), esp. 12–30.

40. Michael D. Bristol, *Big Time Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 1996), 165.

41. Reeder, "You Are Now out of Your Text," 39.

42. Witmore repeatedly notes the proverbial nature of this comparison (*Pretty Creatures*, 6).

43. Richard Greenham, *A godlie exhortation, and fruitfull admonition to vertuous parents and modest matrons* (London: Nicholas Ling, 1584), A6v.

44. Reeder, "You Are Now out of Your Text," 39–40.

ard rather than honesty. Richard initially seems to accept this solution: "O 'tis a perilous boy, / Bold, quick, ingenious, forward, capable: / He is all the mother's from top to toe" (154–56). Even as he rationalizes York's performance, Richard, like Buckingham, cannot seem to help praising it. The sense that the boy is a threat because of his verbal skill and insight seeps through both men's efforts to ascribe that threat to maternal instigation and inheritance. York makes himself into the monkey on Richard's back, "a perilous boy" and a burden that Richard cannot shake, even by having the princes killed.

IV. PERILOUS AND UNRESPECTIVE BOYS

The persistent peril of the princes' challenges to Richard's developmental narrative continues to fester in their absence. This is evident in the way Richard orders their execution. Although he has long planned to murder them, the paranoia he exhibits after being crowned is induced, at least in part, by his conversation with the princes. Richard initially seems to indicate that Edward is a threat simply because he is alive: "O bitter consequence, / That Edward still should live—true noble prince" (4.2.15–16). However, when Buckingham reacts hesitantly to the king's wish that the princes be murdered, Richard declares: "I will converse with iron-witted fools / And unrespective boys. None are for me / That look into me with considerate eyes" (28–30). The princes are not "unrespective," but rather "perilous boy[s]," and it was they, not Buckingham, who noticed the murderous undertones in Richard's conversation. Richard may allude not to the "considerate eyes" of an increasingly "circumspect" (31) Buckingham but rather fear that, having already been "look[ed] into" by his nephews, he is becoming increasingly transparent and vulnerable.

Richard's anxiety after his encounter with the princes is confirmed by his preoccupation with children throughout the scene that follows his coronation. Even Clarence's son and daughter, the children Richard feels most able to control, function as disconcerting echoes of their threatening cousins. He frantically makes plans to marry the little girl off badly, and contemptuously asserts, "The boy is foolish, and I fear not him" (4.2.55). Yet in rushing to dispatch his niece and nephew he implies that there are children worth fearing. Indeed, the Clarence children are not so disposable as he claims. Richard's encounter with the princes calls into question his ability to assess and control children. His assertion of influence over the Clarences draws retroactive attention to the ways in which that influence remains unproven. In their one scene, the Clarence children do accept both Richard's claim that Edward IV was responsible for their father's death and his promise to act as a father to them. The boy reports that his uncle "Bade me rely on him as on my father, / And he would love me as a child" (2.2.25–26). However, in their brief appearance on stage, the Clarence children's behavior is not dependent on Richard's information.

They rightly discern the implications of the emotional reactions of the women, noting Elizabeth's failure to cry for their father, and they participate in the adult chorus of lamentation despite the Duchess's efforts to dismiss them as "incapable and shallow innocents" (2.2.17). As Dubrow notes, the Clarence children's mourning "establishes indeterminacy and the anxieties it breeds as another consequence of the children's bereavements."[45] This indeterminacy would likely have been amplified by doubling, with the same two child actors appearing as both sets of children. The appearance or mention of one pair of siblings thus evokes the other, enhancing the child figures' multiplicity and their resistance to Richard's classifying efforts.

Richard repeatedly attempts to eliminate the threats children pose but instead emphasizes their continuing presence. He calls over a young page who seems to be the sort of "unrespective" child he wants, yet the boy also keeps the focus on his observant nephews. Not only does the page provide the king with Tyrrel's name, his part would likely have been doubled by a child actor playing one of the princes. Richard's anxieties about children extend even to an adult rival:

> I do remember me Henry the Sixth
> Did prophesy that Richmond should be king
> When Richmond was a little peevish boy.
> A king . . . perhaps . . . perhaps—
> How chance the prophet could not, at that time,
> Have told me—I being by—that I should kill him?
>
> (4.2.93–96, 98–99)

Richard in effect worries about the interference of two child kings, recalling Henry VI's innocence along with a missed opportunity to exterminate the future Henry VII. As with the other child kings in his way, Richard's first impulse is murder. However, Henry VI's continued influence from beyond the grave indicates that the princes in the tower will continue to trouble Richard even after their deaths.

Richard's attempt to convince Elizabeth to give him her daughter in marriage further clarifies the princes' continued influence over the breakdown of his self-presentation. When confronted with the princes' deaths, Richard struggles not because the allegations of vicious cruelty made by Elizabeth, Margaret, and the Duchess of York find purchase, but because he can no longer articu-

45. Dubrow, *Shakespeare and Domestic Loss*, 182. On the Clarence children's resistance to the Duchess's strictures, see also Piesse, "Character Building," 71.

late his contradictory identity in politically effective ways. Phyllis Rackin and Jean Howard see the exchange between Richard and Elizabeth as a moment in which Richard appropriates feminine agency for his own use, but this episode also reveals the instability of his personal narrative.[46] Embracing the contradictory tales of his infancy enables Richard's success and establishes the flexible persona he depends on for adult and childlike posturing. However, his hybrid position as neither child nor adult does not function here because the princes have highlighted its inherent volatility. Richard attempts to persuade Elizabeth to give him her daughter in marriage using arguments of substitution similar to those he posed to Anne and to Clarence's children, offering to fill the places of the children, husbands, and fathers he killed. Before seducing Anne, he was confident about such substitutions, but at this point he expresses doubt: "Murder her brothers, and then marry her— / Uncertain way of gain!" (4.2.61–62; cf. 1.1.154–56). Richard can no longer perform all of the roles himself. Instead of playing the child, he depends on fathering one.

One of the strengths of Richard's multifaceted persona is its ability to skew straightforward chronological and lineal progressions. His personal narrative circles between infancy and adulthood; he challenges the legitimacy of every relative in his way. Yet in this encounter, Richard depends not on the appeal of his own multiplicity but rather on the promise of lineal inheritance. He does not propose to replace Elizabeth's sons himself but rather offers her grandchildren: "If I have killed the issue of your womb, / To quicken your increase I will beget / Mine issue of your blood upon your daughter" (4.4.295–97). Richard makes a brief attempt to frame himself as a substitute son, "Again shall you be mother to a king" (4.4.317), but the figure once so comfortable characterizing himself as a child desists after a few attempts at calling Elizabeth "mother."[47] He strains to assert himself as masterful king, father, and appealing child. Richard projects a future union crowned by victory, "Bound with triumphant garlands" (333) to sway Elizabeth and her daughter: "To whom I will retail my conquest won / And she shall be sole victress, Caesar's Caesar" (335–36). He disingenuously offers his prospective wife authority over himself and even credit for future military success. However, Shakespeare's word choice pointedly undercuts Richard's efforts. Through young Edward, the playwright has already characterized Richard as an anti-Caesar, a figure who claims control over his narrative that he does not possess. Shakespeare thus gestures toward the role of the princes in the failure of the king's marriage proposal. Richard is no longer able

46. See Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin, *Engendering a Nation: A Feminist Account of Shakespeare's English Histories* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 106–7.

47. Richard calls Elizabeth "mother" at lines 325 and 412.

to hold together a narrative of development encompassing perilous childhood and kingship.

The fragmentation of Richard's contradictory poses as child and adult becomes especially prominent at the end of the confrontation with Elizabeth. Richard, frustrated by her resistance, describes a gestation as disturbing as his own. Tacitly admitting to murdering the princes, Richard offers: "But in your daughter's womb I bury them, / Where, in that nest of spicery, they will breed / Selves of themselves, to your recomforture" (4.4.423–25). This is another of his attempts to contain the princes, but one so convoluted that it undercuts his efforts at manipulating both Elizabeth and his own future. Dubrow asserts that Richard hints "at an equation between the current penetration of Elizabeth's will and the penetration of her daughter's body."[48] Yet this rhetorical condensation achieves neither goal. Unlike prior uses of his own variable gestations, this story does not allow Richard to appropriate strangeness and deformity for his own benefit. He describes the princes as the agents of reproduction, some strange mix of flora and fauna, the womb an oven and a grave. They are not contained by this weird reburial that is also rebirth, and they certainly do not function as heirs that might stabilize Richard's rule.

Shakespeare stresses Richard's inability to harness the perilous agency of childhood through his inability to have a child. Richard's bizarre tale of the princes' monstrous rebirth highlights his increasing need for a child, an heir other than himself to counteract the collapse of his developmental narrative.[49] When Richard woos Anne, he hints at an unspoken purpose (see 1.1.158), but his pursuit of Princess Elizabeth is overtly motivated by the belief that she will solidify his position: "I must be married to my brother's daughter, / Or else my kingdom stands on brittle glass" (4.2.59–60). While before Richard used accusations of bastardy to prune his family tree with impunity, now this niece's legitimacy is necessary to strengthen his rule, and an heir will forestall other claimants. His sparring with Elizabeth recalls Anne's curse:

> If ever he have child, abortive be it,
> Prodigious, and untimely brought to light,
> Whose ugly and unnatural aspect
> May fright the hopeful mother at the view,
> And that be heir to his unhappiness.
>
> (1.2.21–25)

48. Dubrow, *Shakespeare and Domestic Loss*, 181.

49. Moulton links Richard's barrenness to his monstrosity but argues Richard does not care about progeny (265).

Although, historically, Richard and Anne did have a son, another ill-fated Edward, Prince of Wales, Shakespeare eliminates him and instead stresses Richard's biological sterility. Garber notes that Anne's curse may be read as depicting Richard's efforts at autogenesis or the birth of history itself, deformed and twisted.[50] In a sense, it does both at once. Richard's tale of himself is the prodigy Anne predicts in all senses of the word. It is an omen, a monstrosity, and a form of precocious child. Richard's versions of himself are "untimely" and ugly and include the horrified reactions of women present at his birth(s). His narrative itself is "abortive," as it comes apart before the play's end, much to the dismay of Richard, its "mother." His story of the princes' implantation in their sister exemplifies this unraveling. The tale that Richard does not truly control proves to be his only—misshapen and "abortive"—heir.

Although just two of the many ghosts that appear to Richard on the eve of Bosworth, Edward and York are not only victims but also agents of Richard's final fragmentation.[51] Shakespeare gives the princes the language of reproduction so prominent in Richard's conversation with their mother, demonstrating their participation in the collapse of their uncle's self-presentation. When the princes arrive, they promise Richmond heirs: "Live, and beget a happy race of kings!" (5.3.158). They also make it clear that the body they are "buried" in is not their sister's, but Richard's own: "Let us be lead within thy bosom, Richard, / And weight thee down to ruin, shame, and death" (153–54). Indeed, when Richard wakes, that unique body proves incapable of holding together so many self-contradictory stories any longer:

> What do I fear? Myself? There's none else by.
> Richard loves Richard; that is, I and I.
> Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am.
> Then fly. What, from myself? Great reason why—
> Lest I revenge. What, myself upon myself?
>
> (5.3.183–87)

Richard disintegrates, the multiple versions of his childish and adult selves pulling apart. He is swift and slow; he loves and hates himself. As with the versions of early modern childhood—innocence and innate sinfulness, wit and mimicry, lambs and apes, weeds and herbs—many possibilities exist but Richard can no longer manage them. Shakespeare's repetition of "myself" recalls the moment when Richard tries to convince Elizabeth of his truthfulness by swearing on his

50. Garber, *Shakespeare's Ghost Writers*, 45–46.
51. The Duchess also emphasizes the princes' active role in Richard's downfall: 4.4.192–94.

crown, on his father, on the future, on "myself," to which she replies: "Thyself is self-misused" (4.4.374). And so he is. Richard has constructed a persona that he cannot swear by and that is not stable enough to support his ambitions. Childhood perilousness is useful for political maneuvering, but its fluctuations offer little stability.

Throughout his rise to power, Richard attains success by being both an adult and a child, and by being neither. As a hybrid figure, he claims the strengths and rejects the weaknesses of both worlds. He tries to appropriate the useful contradictions of childhood and the recognized authority of adulthood. However, the paradoxical nature of the childhood agency he uses endangers him. Destabilized by Edward and York, themselves paradoxical children who resist his attempts at categorization, he can neither maintain his hybrid stance nor ascribe to a singular option. In her final appearance on stage, Margaret calls Richard "That dog, that had his teeth before his eyes" (4.4.49). Richard could once have made good use of the assertion that his senses developed like an animal's. The insult could complement his varied trajectories of growth, and he could turn metaphorical lack of vision into a cruel justification for attacking anyone in his way. However, his sharp baby teeth have fallen out, and he has no adult teeth to grow in—no definitively adult persona to adopt in their place. In Shakespeare's play, Richard III tries to fit the versions of his gestation, birth, and childhood into a cohesive narrative on which to base his adult life and reign, only to fragment along the fault lines of his paradoxical tale.