Shakespeare's King John: A Play in Search of a Hero

Susan Shibe Davis

One of the most puzzling characters in the Shakespeare canon is Philip Faulconbridge, the bastard son of Richard Coeur de Lion, in The Life and Death of King John. Scholars such as E. M. W. Tillyard, Dover Wilson, and John Middleton Murry see the Bastard as the hero in a drama that clearly lacks a heroic king.[1] James L. Calderwood and William H. Matchett believe the Bastard is the embodiment of honor in a world in which commodity and justice are continually juxtaposed. Julia Van de Water sees Philip poised between two points: a "thinly disguised vice figure" (143) and a true English patriot. Only Calderwood and Matchett see him as a fully developed character.

The Bastard remains problematic for scholars who attempt to fit Philip into traditional roles like the hero, the honorable man, the vice, or the patriot. However, if one reads Philip according to Anglo-American feminist poetics, one can see that he assumes a definite feminine posture. As such, he functions initially as a mistress who prostitutes himself to King John for the sake of expediency. However, by the end of the drama, he transcends this position to become the dutiful wife to England itself, thereby uniting the two seemingly disparate characters into one integrated individual who is far superior to any other person in the play.

One can read Philip as a woman because of his historically marginalized position. In Act I.i Philip's half-brother Robert

Faulconbridge confronts the King with a story his father told him: his older brother is not the son of the elder Faulconbridge, for he was conceived while Robert's father was serving Richard I overseas. Robert asks the King to ignore the laws of primogeniture and grant him — the rightful heir — his father's estates. Both the King and his mother Queen Eleanor notice that Philip does favor the deceased Richard. Despite this resemblance, King John, following the laws of his day, replies:

> Sirrah, your brother is legitimate,
> Your father's wife did after wedlock bear him
> And if she did play false, the fault was hers
> Which fault lies on the hazards of all husbands
> That marry wives. … (Act I.i. 116-20)[1]

Queen Eleanor then asks Philip if he will forsake his inheritance and follow her to France. Philip consents and is dubbed Sir Richard by the King.

After the King and his court leave the hall, Philip is approached by his mother, who is angry about her sons' accusations. Philip says that he has forsaken his inheritance and has been knighted by the King. Lady Faulconbridge then admits, "Thou art the issue of my dear offense, / Which was so strongly urged past my defense" (Act I.i. 258-9). Learning that his father is indeed Richard Coeur de Lion, the Bastard says, "Madam, I would not wish a better father" (Act I.i. 260). What the elder Faulconbridge and the King and Queen suspected

1 All references to the play are from the Arden edition, edited by E. A. J. Honigmann (London, 1954).

is true. Now Philip is free to use his illegitimacy to his advantage.

The circumstances surrounding Philip's lineage are more complex than they might appear. Lawrence Stone notes that:

> Male adultery with lower-class women and the procreation of bastards by them always tend to be regarded as moral by social groups whose marriages are arranged and not consensual. Consequently, in the sixteenth century, husbands felt free to take lower-class mistresses and to beget bastards without any sense of shame and any attempt at concealment. The children of these unions were frequently mentioned in wills and open provision was made for their upkeep and education. (502)

Stone's comment explains the royal family's readiness to accept Richard's son. However, one must consider that the above quote refers to the children of unmarried mothers — not to Philip, the child of an adulterous affair. Phyllis Rackin notes that "Lady Faulconbridge's infidelity has created the nightmare situation that haunts the patriarchal imagination — a son not of her husband's getting destined to inherit her husband's deeds and title" (341). Earlier Richard I had honored the elder Faulconbridge with knighthood, but he dishonored him by sleeping with his wife.

To further understand Philip's marginalized position, one might consider the title page of the anonymous The Troublesome Raigne of King John. Preceding the preface to the readers, the author writes, "The Troubelsome Raigne of John King of England, with the discoverie of King Richard Cordelions Base sonne (vulgarly named, The Bastard Fawconbridge)" (Bullough 72). The term "base" is later

echoed in Edmund the bastard's famous opening soliloquy in Act I of King Lear. Edmund uses "base" in reference to himself five times in just four lines. Like Edmund, Philip is a bastard. Because of this, the Renaissance audience would immediately view him as one who is alienated from the other characters in the play.

During their quarrel before the gates of the city of Angiers, Queen Eleanor and Constance further underscore the marginalized position of a bastard with an adulterous mother. In Act II the two women quarrel over who holds the rights of the English throne: Eleanor's son John or Constance's son Arthur. Their verbal attacks consist of accusing each other of adultery and of producing bastards. These accusations are powerful because a Renaissance audience would view the illegitimate son of an adulteress as doubly cursed.

In order to view Philip's position as feminine, one might briefly consider the views of Elaine Showalter. In "Toward a Feminist Poetics," Showalter points out that readers can analyze a literary text by examining its characters according to cultural stereotypes (25). In the first two acts of King John, the Bastard behaves much like the stereotypical prostitute of the Renaissance. The Queen rebukes him after he casts aspersions on his mother's honor, but Eleanor's remarks fail to quell his behavior. The majority of his lines in this scene contain sexual puns alluding to his illegitimacy. After he gives Sir Robert's inheritance to his half-brother, he says:

> My father gave me honor, yours gave land.
> Now blessed be the hour, by night or day,
> When I was got, Sir Robert was away! (I.i. 164-6)

Honigmann has pointed out that the words "hour" and "whore" were

homophones at this time (12). Philip's comments are underscored by his actions in this scene: he forsakes his inheritance in hopes that he will gain more from the King. Thus, he voluntarily prostitutes himself, thereby assuming his marginalized position.

The Bastard's bawdy behavior (again, much like that of the stereotypical prostitute) is carried over into Act Ⅱ when the English party meets the French and their allies before the gates of Angiers. Philip interrupts King John twice as the monarch tells the people of the city that he has brought witnesses to prove he is the rightful king. Each of his interruptions centers on himself as a "bastard," which foregrounds his position. Like a stereotypical prostitute, Philip basks in his position, and he wants his relationship with King John to be recognized since it is the only sort of distinction that is rightfully his.

The king, however, does not always tolerate the Bastard's behavior. From the time the royal party arrives on the continent and meets the French and their allies, Philip begins to taunt Austria, a man whom Renaissance audiences believed to be the killer of Richard I. At one point, the Bastard interrupts Constance's verbal attack on King John and King Philip twice. Finally, John frowns at him and says, "We like not this: thou dost forget thyself" (Act Ⅲ.i. 60). Again, the Bastard's loud, boisterous behavior is analogous to that of the typical prostitute, and like any marginalized figure can be, he is rebuked and put in his place by an individual with authority.

Philip soon learns that the woman's position is not always advantageous. When Hubert suggests that King John marry his niece Blanche to the Dauphin Lewis in order to settle the dispute between England and France, the Bastard is astounded. "Zounds," he says, "I was never so bethump'd with words / Since I first call'd my brother's father dad" (Act Ⅱ.i. 466-7). At the end of Act Ⅱ, the Bastard delivers

his famous speech concerning Commodity. He clearly shows his sympathy for Blanche when he compares Commodity to a broker, or a "pimp or procuress" (Honigmann 52). Philip says:

> That broker, that still breaks the pate of faith,
> That daily break-vow, he that wins of all,
> Of kings, of beggars, old men, young men, maids,
> Who, having no external thing to lose
> But the word 'maid', cheats the poor maid of that, ···
>
> (Act Ⅱ.i. 568-72)

The Bastard suddenly realizes that the world is nothing more than a market place in which individuals such as Blanche are bartered in return for power and money.

Philip's immediate response is cynical. He concludes his speech by saying, "Since kings break faith upon commodity, / Gain be my lord, for I will worship thee" (Act Ⅱ.i. 597-8). Ironically, the Bastard fails to realize that he has always been opportunistic since his first encounter with King John and that he continues to subscribe to this shameless philosophy by following John's order to ransack the monasteries upon his return to England. It is in this careerist sense that he continues to prostitute himself to the King for his own personal gain.

Despite Philip's later obeisance to the king, one can regard the scene in which John arranges his niece's marriage to the Dauphin as one of the most significant parts of the play insofar as it serves as an important part of the Bastard's development. Matchette believes that, to the Bastard, Blanche primarily serves as an example of duty and honor because she readily submits herself to the wishes of her uncle. (One might argue that as a woman she has little choice.

Certainly she serves as a stark contrast to the shrewish behavior of Eleanor and Constance and the adulterous actions of Lady Faulconbridge — the only other females in the play.) Most audiences would agree that Blanche's marriage brings to the forefront the controlling metaphor of the drama: the world is a marketplace in which individuals buy and sell themselves and others for their own scheming self-interest. As a bartered bride, Blanche becomes a microcosmic example of the sexual politics at work in the drama. At the same time, Philip, who has voluntarily placed himself in the position of a prostitute up to this point, now seems to serve as a foil for the chaste Blanche.

The Bastard clearly understands the world in which he lives, but he does not make any effort to change himself until England is threatened by invasion from France. Then he gently rebukes King John for his cowardice and tries to stir him to action:

> … wherefore do you droop? Why look you so sad?
> Be great in act, as you have been in thought;
> Let not the world see fear and sad distrust
> Govern the motion of a kingly eye!
> Be stirring as the time, be fire with fire,
> Threaten the threat'ner and outface the brow
> Of bragging horror: so shall inferior eyes,
> That borrow their behaviours from the great,
> Grow great by your example and put on
> The dauntless spirit of resolution. (V.i. 44-53)

When the king tells the Bastard that he is depending upon the Pope's legate to mediate a truce, the Bastard leaves, determined to fight the

French with his troops.

Philip may have failed in his attempt to rally John, but one can see that he is no longer primarily concerned with his own interests. Discussing the duties of a wife during the Renaissance, Ruth Kelso quotes Luis Vives, a writer of the period:

> A wise woman . . . shall learn precepts of wisdome to exhort [her husband] unto vertue, or draw him from vice with all, and some sage sentences against the assaults and rages of both fortunes, both to plucke downe her husbands stomacke, if hee be proud of prosperity and wealth: and comfort and heart, if he be stricken with adversitie . . . (108-9)

Vives' description of a wife parallels the behavior of the Bastard, who, in an attempt to encourage John to fight for his country, seems to be shifting his position from prostitute to wife.

To the audience, Philip's behavior is apparently changing. However, the change is a slow process during which he seems unsure of his position in the world. The Bastard reveals his own insecurity about his identity during his encounter with Hubert in the sixth scene of Act V. Coming upon Philip in the dark, Hubert calls out, "Who's there?" The Bastard replies, "Who thou wilt." Hubert then tells him that the king, poisoned by a monk, lies near death. Calderwood (356) and Matchett (251) interpret this scene as one in which Hubert encourages the Bastard to assume the throne. They conclude that by this time Philip is too honorable to usurp young Prince Henry's right to the throne. Matchett sees the Bastard as resisting Hubert's tempting offer when he says, "Withhold thine indignation, mighty heaven, /

And tempt us not to bear above our power" (V.vi. 37-8).

There are, however, several problems with Calderwood's and Matchett's interpretation. First, "us" in the above quote seems to refer to the English army rather than Philip himself. At this point in the play, the Bastard totally commits himself to protecting England from the threat of invasion, and he continues to devote himself to this cause after the death of John and the ascension of Prince Henry. When the prince makes plans to leave Swinburne after his father's death, the Bastard, unaware that the Dauphin and his forces have retreated, tells Henry that he will stay behind to fight the French. He hopes that the nobles who have renewed their allegiance to the crown will join him in the fight (V.vii. 70-80). Even after John's death, his commitment to the country itself never wavers.

Even if the Bastard were to consider usurping the throne, he could do so only briefly. If Philip were to make such an attempt, Shakespeare would have to change history even more than he has already done. (The bastard son of Coeur de Lion appears only briefly in the history books and not in the context of the struggles encountered by King John.) Rackin notes that "the Bastard has no real place in history, neither in the chain of patriarchal succession, where he can *never* inherit his father's throne, nor in the historical record of Shakespeare found in Holinshed" (italics mine 340-1). Rackin, too, seems to believe that the Bastard — because of his marginalized position — could never legitimately ascend to the throne. The Church of Rome may have viewed Elizabeth I as a bastard, but the English Renaissance audience would not. There would be a clear distinction between Philip the Bastard and the present queen of England — especially in a drama such as King John in which the Church of Rome interferes with the English king's authority.

The Bastard knows he has no right to the throne, and he clearly exhibits this knowledge when he kneels to the young Prince Henry. When he does so, he puts his own self-interest aside and visibly commits himself to his country. Thus, he moves from his prior position as mistress to the king and becomes wife to England. In most instances, one would identify England with the female, but in this play, both France and England can be viewed as male. In fact, King Philip is referred to as "France" eight times, and King John is referred to as "England" six times. Since the king is synonymous with the country itself, one can legitimately view the Bastard as wife, for it is his marginalized position which allows him to be a wife. He cannot assume the place he might have had as the legal heir to Coeur de Lion. In the feminine position, he remains marginalized in the context of the society in which he lives, but as wife to England, he gains a degree of power and respect he never had in the position of prostitute.

By placing the Bastard in the *position* of woman, one can avoid the labels of hero, honorable man, vice, and patriot. In doing so, one creates different literary analytical models in which the paradigm of the market place can be further explored. Rackin categorizes the women in The Life and Death of King John as either good or bad. Blanche is "the conventional compliant woman [who] allows herself to be used." (339). As a pliant patriarchic slave, she is, like most of the characters, brought down to the level of commerce. Eleanor and Constance are shrews, concerned with their own interests; Lady Faulconbridge is an adulteress. In any case, the woman loses. If, however, the Bastard is positioned as mistress and wife, he serves as a foil to Blanche as well as the other women in the play, thereby transcending the level upon which the other characters are placed and achieving the honorable place that the play seems to accord him.

1 Usually the title character of the play is the hero. However, in the popular imagination, John has almost always been regarded as England's worst monarch. Some writers still refer to him as "Bad King John". Critics argue that he lost Normandy and almost all of England's other territories in France, and his reckless irresponsibility prompted the barons to rebel. The fact that they forced John to sign the Magna Carta in 1215 following the revolt is proof of his despotic rule. Later historians, however, depict John as cultured and literate as well as an excellent administrator. His major achievements include reforms in the judicial, financial and military systems. Whatever his accomplishments, it is interesting to note that no British prince has been named John for 800 years.

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