

## Radical Engagement: The Bastard in William Shakespeare's *King John*

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### Introduction: Bastardy on the Stage of History

Shakespeare presented bastard characters in a number of plays from the outset of his career, which coincided with the first dramatisations of explicit 'bastards' in the late 1580s and early 1590s. In 1588, *The Misfortunes of Arthur*, ascribed to Thomas Hughes, included the character of Mordred, Arthur's bastard son.<sup>1</sup> *The Troublesome Raigne of King John*, the most immediate source for Shakespeare's *The Life and Death of King John*, was probably written around 1590.<sup>2</sup> *Henry VI pt 1* was also written at this time, and included the bastard Bishop of Winchester, the Bastard of Orleans, and Joan la Pucelle, whose parentage is disputed in the play. Furthermore, Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* also dramatised the conception and birth of a bastard baby to Aaron the Moor and Tamora, Queen of the Goths. Thus the bastard-figure emerged from these early works to become a common type in Jacobean drama.

In *King John*, Shakespeare takes the bastard character Philip Faulconbridge from the anonymous play *The Troublesome Raigne* and transforms this character, and the play itself.<sup>3</sup> By putting this character centre stage rather than in a subordinate position to the king, Shakespeare raises the related issues of the position of the bastard

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Hughes, *The Misfortunes of Arthur*, University of Toronto Robarts Library Online, <<http://archive.org/details/misfortunesofart00hughuoft>> [accessed 23rd May 2012].

<sup>2</sup> Anonymous, 'The Troublesome Raigne of King John', in *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, ed. Geoffrey Bullough, Vol. IV (London: Routledge, 1962).

<sup>3</sup> William Shakespeare, 'King John' in *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works Compact Edition*, eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). All references to the play are from this text, unless otherwise stated.

in society and the legitimacy of rulers, since it transpires this character is in fact the bastard son of Richard the Lionheart. Philip begins as eldest son to Sir Robert Faulconbridge, in dispute with Robert Faulconbridge Junior, his younger brother, about the inheritance of the dead father's estate, and so straddles gentry and nobility status in the higher echelons of Elizabethan society. However, through his engagement with the audience and his demotic style, Philip is shown to also relate to the lower orders of society.

In this paper I will look at the socio-economic and political context of the period in which *King John* was written and performed, and consider the extent to which the bastard figure in the play embodies the concerns and discontent of young, non-inheriting males and other social malcontents. I will contrast the depiction of Philip the Bastard in *King John* and in *The Troublesome Raigne* to show how Shakespeare transforms this character into a radical dramatic persona, able and willing to enter political terrain from which he would normally be barred, and prepared to challenge and critique existing hierarchical socio-economic and political structures.

### **Historical Context: Bastardy, the Social Order and Social Disorder**

From the 1960s to the 1980s, the pioneering work of the SSRC Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure examined a period of more than 400 years and a very wide geographical range.<sup>4</sup> The group calculated the ratio of recorded illegitimate births to legitimate births, based on parish register records. The data for England and Wales from 1550 shows a rise in this ratio between 1570 and 1600, increasing from 1.9% to a historical high of 3.4% at the end of the century. The

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Laslett, Karla Oosterveen and Richard M Smith, eds., *Bastardy and its Comparative History: Studies in the history of illegitimacy and marital non-conformism in Britain, France, Germany, Sweden, North America, Jamaica and Japan* (Virginia: Edward Arnold, 1980), p. 160.

Bastard in *King John* can therefore be seen as an embodiment of the recalcitrant energy of excluded, dispossessed, and disaffected youth of the time.

Findlay draws attention to the link between bastardy, rebellious youth, and criminals, quoting from West Suffolk Record Office (1624): '[Those] that shall be noisome and offensive [...] robbers [...] women [who] have or shall have [...] a bastard [...] all reputed fathers of base children' will be subject to criminal sanction.<sup>5</sup> According to S R Smith, apprentices, like bastards, often felt disenfranchised and out-of-place: 'put into other families of which they were a part and yet always apart; they were *in* but not *of*.'<sup>6</sup> Records show that the Privy Council saw the theatre and social malcontents as mutually sustaining:

[Where] certaine apprentices and other idle people and their adherents [hold] unlawfull assemblies... take order that there be noe playes used in any place neere thereabouts [...] nor no other sorte of unlawfull or forbidden pastimes that drawe together the baser sorte of people.<sup>7</sup>

The terminology used here stigmatises the discontented urban poor with the lexis of bastardy: 'baser'. It also associates theatre with illicit pleasure, and the two are implicitly linked. Perceptions of bastards were interwoven with fears of social disorder and the stereotyping of the lower orders. England faced a deep economic crisis in the 1590s, with prices, unemployment, and anti-immigrant feeling rising. This added to the combustible and fractious social mix. During the 1580-90s, as Manning indicates, rioting was especially common: 'Between 1581 and 1602,

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<sup>5</sup> Alison Findlay, *Illegitimate Power: Bastards in Renaissance Drama* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 98.

<sup>6</sup> S. R. Smith, 'The London Apprentices as Seventeenth Century Adolescents', in *Past and Present Issue 61* (1973), from Findlay, p. 100.

<sup>7</sup> J. R. Dasent, *Acts of the Privy Council 1591-2* 22:550, From Annabel Patterson, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 35.

[London] was disturbed by [...] 35 outbreaks of disorder', about twice the frequency of this type of events between 1517 and 1640 overall.<sup>8</sup> As a citizen of London who lived and worked at its heart, Shakespeare would have been aware of these tensions and frustrations; and as an actor and playwright he would have experienced its impact directly, as official disquiet about social disorder also had an impact on actors. After the controversy over the production of the play *The Isle of Dogs* in 1597, which saw several people jailed,<sup>9</sup> Thomas Nashe noted the rapid weakening of the bonds of patronage between the nobility and theatre companies: 'The players [...] ar piteously persecuted by the L. Maior & the aldermen, & however in their old Lords tyme they thought there state settled, it is now so uncertain that they cannot build upon it'.<sup>10</sup>

The situation did not only affect the lower orders or the theatrical and literary scene. Salinger points out that from the 1590s successive monarchs 'unloaded vast parcels of Crown lands to eager speculators' to raise revenue to support the crown. Almost the entire nobility were forced by economic necessity to take part in this process, causing 'an intensification of faction struggles' in the upper ranks.<sup>11</sup> The character Philip Faulconbridge has a foot in the upper as well as the lower orders, giving him a unique perspective on this situation. Thus Shakespeare's Bastard, as representative of a significant section of the audience, might be said to be already present from the very start of the play, though he arrives on stage approximately fifty lines in. Furthermore, there is an additional sense in which he has a presence in the play. As well as embodying socio-cultural characteristics recognisable in his audience

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<sup>8</sup> Brian Manning, *Village Revolts: Social Protest and Popular Disturbances in England 1509-1640* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 187.

<sup>9</sup> Roslyn I. Knutson, 'Playing Companies and Repertory' in Arthur F. Kinney, ed., *A Companion to Renaissance Drama* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), p. 184.

<sup>10</sup> E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, Vol. 4/4 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923), 4:319.

<sup>11</sup> L. G. Salinger, 'The Social Setting', in *The Pelican Guide to English Literature: The Age of Shakespeare*, ed. Boris Ford (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p. 36.

and the wider community, as Findlay shows, he is also a dramatic exploration of what it meant to be a bastard in this era.

The conversation that precedes the arrival of the Faulconbridge brothers involves a terse exchange between King John, his mother Queen Eleanor, and Chatillon, the French ambassador, concerning disputed territorial ownership and the legitimacy of John's claim to the English throne itself. Chatillon refers to John's 'borrowed majesty' (1.1.4) and adumbrates the 'most lawful claim' (1.1.9) of Arthur Plantagenet to the English throne as the inheriting eldest son of John's dead elder brother Geoffrey (1.1.7-15), asking provocatively that he 'lay aside the sword which sways usurpingly these several titles' (1.1.12-13). In an aside to John, Eleanor seems to confirm the French view that John is only monarch by might, not right, saying 'Your strong possession much more than your right' (1.1.40). This contrasts with the Eleanor of *The Troublesome Raigne*, who is convinced of John's merits as well as his right to rule, a view which the grand and ceremonial opening to this play seems designed to endorse.

The argument over legitimacy-to-rule in *King John* thus foregrounds the dispute between the two Faulconbridge brothers that immediately follows. It also hints at the questionable nature of the legitimacy-to-rule of the actual monarch of the time (Elizabeth having been officially bastardised by Henry VIII when he divorced Anne Boleyn on the grounds of adultery), and the insecurities and internal power struggles taking place amongst nobles, foreign powers, and bureaucrats about who should succeed the ageing, childless queen on her death. All this added to a popular sense of instability, especially in London. Heinemann suggests that the public arena became a cultural and political battleground in this period in that, whilst condemning

popular theatre, 'The Aldermen [...] lavished [money] on Lord Mayors' pageants to impress Londoners [...] and to preach [...] industry and thrift.'<sup>12</sup>

### **Dramatising the Bastard: Making the Running and Taking the Stage**

In *The Troublesome Raigne* the two brothers are brought on stage to answer charges of riotous behaviour in public, as they have fought physically over the right to inherit. Thus the plot and sub-plot are conventionally positioned and sufficiently detached so that the former does not interfere with the latter. Furthermore, there is a shared assumption that bastardy is despicable and loathsome. Robert describes his elder brother as 'Base born, and base begot, no Faulconbridge' (1.120). Philip himself accepts that he is 'the poorest Kinsman that your Highnes hath' (1.289), and accuses his mother of harming him psychologically: 'This gross attaint that tilteth in my thoughts' (1.329). Findlay suggests that Spurio in *The Revenger's Tragedy* of 1606 is a typical representative of this mode of thinking: 'truly begot in evil' (1.1.3), and that the Duchess' view that bastardy is inimical to divine law was a common one.<sup>13</sup> In *The Troublesome Raigne*, this proposition underpins the agonies of Philip and his mother, but in *King John* it is only Salisbury, leader of the treacherous nobles, who articulates such virulent hatred: 'That misbegotten devil, Faulconbridge' (5.4.4). This type of prejudice is therefore itself marginalised in *King John*, rather than the victims of prejudice themselves.

The atmosphere of contention and discord between England and France established at the opening of *King John* is punctured when Philip Faulconbridge arrives, immediately taking the lead and initiating dialogue, as if he were at home on

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<sup>12</sup> Margot Heinemann, *Puritanism and Theatre: Thomas Middleton and Opposition Drama under the Early Stuarts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 32.

<sup>13</sup> Cyril Tourneur, *The Revenger's Tragedy* ed. Brian Gibbons (New Mermaids: London, 1971)

this elevated stage from the start: ‘Your faithful subject I, a gentleman’ (1.1.49).<sup>14</sup> He is candid and direct, confidently answering accusations and pointed questions from the king and queen, and joking about the generally high probability of bastardy and the doubts people often have about their parentage:

But for the certain knowledge of that truth  
I put you o’er to heav’n and to my mother.  
Of that I doubt, as all men’s children may. (1.1.61-3)

This intervention serves to ‘normalise’ the issue of bastardy, raising the prospect of it forming an inclusive category rather than the restricted one of the ‘tainted’ or polluted other assigned to it, both during and long after this period.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, the Bastard of *The Troublesome Raigne* is humble and apologetic: ‘Please it your Majestie the fault is mine’ (1.85). He presents his case as one of high-minded family honour: ‘The shameful slander of my parents’ (1.87). Philip’s grovelling attempt to have his brother’s claims dismissed as a product of insanity: ‘Here I beseech your Grace [...] to count him mad...’ (1.148-9), shows him to be desperate and compromised. In this text, then, bastardy is condemned as morally deficient and is shown to produce an inferiority complex in the bastards themselves.

However, whilst *The Troublesome Raigne* reflects societal detestation of bastardy, *King John* challenges the implicit moral binaries inherent in such positions. In a society where inheritance was dominated by male primogeniture, with its tendency to divide those genetically closest to each other and to thus leave younger siblings and females dependent on others and curtailing life chances for a large section of the population, these insecurities often fed insubordinate behaviour.<sup>16</sup> In

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<sup>14</sup> Wells and Taylor: all references are incorporated into the text.

<sup>15</sup> Laslett et al. (p. 37) point out the enduring nature of the demonisation of bastardy over the centuries.

<sup>16</sup> Findlay, p. 89.

*King John*, however, the Bastard's verbal insubordination is shown to be witty and satirical, bordering on travesty. Bristol states that carnivalesque cultural practices of the lower orders 'facilitate the disclosure of contingency and arbitrariness in the allocation of social identity', and this subversive tendency is part of the Bastard's complex role.<sup>17</sup> Philip speaks to the grievances of the non-inheriting, the disempowered, and the dispossessed, yet he makes this critique with a pithy humour rather than resentment: 'If he can prove it, he pops me out [...] from fair five hundred pounds a year' (1.1.68-9). The same is true when he counters his brother's embarrassed, euphemistic circumlocution about how his father came to be away when Philip was conceived:

ROBERT: Your brother did employ my father much [...]

BASTARD: Your tale must be how he employed my mother.

(1.1.96-8)

This paranomasic technique, whereby the Bastard picks up and redeploys particular words and phrases used by others, is a common feature of his mischievously antagonistic discourse. An example is found in the way in which he interpolates Constance's contemptuous dismissal of Austria into the conversation on several occasions with wit and spontaneity: 'and hang a calve's-skin on those recreant limbs' (3.1.55). He also specialises in interruptions, puncturing the pompous Austria's attempt to silence argumentative women with the phrase 'Hear the crier!' (2.1.134), and undermining the bombast of the two kings as they confront each other prior to battle by reminding both that the armies they boast about contain 'Some bastards too' (2.1.279). Not only does he directly interrupt his superiors and interject at a formally serious moment, he also raises the flag of the disenfranchised, showing them not to be

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<sup>17</sup> Michael D Bristol, *Carnival and Theater: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (Methuen: London, 1985), p. 70.



an alien other, a third army on the battlefield, but as belonging to all social, political, and national formations. Bristol claims that '[when] political reality is brought into familiar contact with everyday life, its pretensions to grandeur are uncrowned', and it is as if the Bastard acts as the interface where this debunking occurs in *King John*.<sup>18</sup>

Philip is recognised as a true Angevin by John and Eleanor. He is offered a choice between inheriting as a rich, landed squire or becoming a poor, landless royal – and he takes the latter, showing a penchant for risk-taking and adventure. He is gallant towards his previous family, though he can't resist a typically demotic witticism about legitimacy when bidding farewell to his brother:

Brother, adieu, good fortune come to thee  
For thou wast got i'th' way of honesty. (1.1.181-2)

It is clear that unlike his precursor in *The Troublesome Raigne*, this Bastard feels an affinity with his mother, declaring to her that 'your fault was not your folly', since he understands that she was bound to succumb to a monarch's will, and since she 'didst [...] well when I was got' (1.1.271), exploiting a difficult situation wisely. Philip seems more in tune with women than men in general, which suggests that this attachment is not simply familial but that he identifies and empathises with women in their marginalised, constrained roles. His brother, on the other hand, moralistically attacks his mother, 'To my mother's shame and his reproach he is no heir, nor yet legitimate' (1.1.26), echoing the words of Philip Faulconbridge in *The Troublesome Raigne*, given above. Shakespeare reallocates attitudes and phrases in his rewriting of this plot in a way that consistently challenges assumptions and prejudices about bastardy.

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<sup>18</sup> Bristol, p. 71.

**Playing with Words: His Dry Wit is a Hit**

Philip the Bastard has the ability to strip away pretension, challenge preconceptions and resist conformity. For instance, when he has been accepted into the royal family, ceremonially knighted, and had his name changed, he jokes wryly about the contradictory nature of his change of circumstances. In doing so, Philip employs a paranomastic play on 'foot', a word the connotations of which associate the Bastard with physical, intellectual, and social mobility, as well as having phonic resemblance to the taboo sexual word 'fuck':

A foot of honour better than I was,  
But many a many a foot of land the worse! (1.1.182-3)

He also points out the absurdity and quasi-random nature of name changing: 'And if his name be George I'll call him Peter' (1.1.244). He prefers the signifier of identity which he has made his own, compared to the new one his changed status has imposed upon him, suggesting that his sense of his own identity outweighs the power of the monarch to label him, and the conventional determinism of onomastics, rooted in parentage and ancestry. In this regard, it is interesting that both of the Bastard's names are peripheral in the text, as he is referred to throughout in the speech prefixes as 'Bastard' in *King John*, even before he is officially recognised as one, and is rarely referred to by name. In a sense then, this character transcends individual identity and enters the arena as a fully formed yet nascent dramatic type.

The Bastard is given two key soliloquies early in the play, and this gives him a privileged dramatic position in relation to the audience. In the first he lampoons the absurdity of the life of luxury and pretension to higher knowledge amongst courtly insiders, made more humorous by his projection of himself into that position, and the

juxtaposition of the vulgar language of appetite and bodily processes to intellectual and (in the near-rhyming couplet) poetic elevation:

And when my knightly stomach is sufficed  
Why then I pick my teeth and catechize. (1.1.191-2)

He satirises the conventions of courtesy and discourse of what he ironically terms ‘worshipful society’ (1.1.205). Beside the sharp humour, though, there also exists a more serious and, for the authorities, more troubling element to the Bastard’s words. He ends the soliloquy by stating that he intends ‘To deliver sweet, sweet, sweet poison for the ages tooth’ (1.1.213), insinuating a plan to ruin this privileged elite. He recognises that to succeed in such a world requires guile and ruthlessness, and we are left in no doubt that he intends to exploit his understanding of the duplicity of others to achieve his own aims:

[...] Though I will not practice to deceive,  
yet to avoid deceit I must learn;  
For it shall strew the footsteps of my rising. (1.1.204-6)

This suggestion hints at the febrile world of espionage and conspiracy, and perhaps to some members of the audience it insinuated a plan to replace the existing monarch with someone with whom they might feel greater affinity.<sup>19</sup>

After having observed the stand-off between the two kings on the battlefield and heard the convoluted bargaining between them, the Bastard comments drily on the ridiculous nature of rule in the world in his second soliloquy: ‘Mad world, mad kings, mad composition!’ (2.1.562). He satirises the corrupt nature of political deals and the way they undermine civil and social structures:

Commodity, the bias of the world [...]

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<sup>19</sup> Richard Wilson, *Secret Shakespeare: Studies in theatre, religion and resistance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 134-9.

Makes [life] take head from all indifferency. (2.1.575-80)

Yet, at the same time he recognises that, since this is the way the game is played, he can play it to his own advantage:

Since kings break faith upon commodity,  
Gain be my lord, for I will worship thee. (2.1.598-9)

There is a sense that bastards are effectively excluded from the terrain of power from birth, yet that their particular marginalisation enables them to see, and therefore potentially exploit the nature of that world and its institutions, to which they need not have any real attachment and about which they need not have any illusions, unlike those with vested interests in them. Their social negation paradoxically gives them freedom of movement, thought, and speech which they would not otherwise have.

### **Audacity, Authority, and Approaching Apocalypse**

As the play unfolds, the Bastard increasingly takes charge of situations, changing his own or other's plans according to the requirements of a situation, such as when he convinces King Philip and King John to join forces to destroy Angers before engaging in combat: 'Your royal presences be ruled by me' (2.1.356). Though he remains loyal to John throughout, he increasingly stands in as decision-maker while the king expires, running the diplomatic, martial, and propaganda campaign against France virtually single-handedly. In doing so, he shows an ability to remain ahead of others in his grasp of situations:

Why stand these royal fronts amazed thus?  
Cry 'havoc!' kings; back to the stained field. (2.1.356-7)

The erotema followed by an imperative here is also typical of Faulconbridge. He demystifies reality, and draws conclusions quickly and definitively. He doesn't romanticise situations or individuals, but manifests a rugged realism in his deeds.

Once again, this type of character trait is very different from the Bastard of *The Troublesome Raigne*. For instance, in the latter play the Bastard is driven to seek revenge for the killing of Richard I by an acute sense of pride and family honour: 'My Father's foe clad in my Father's spoyle' (2.136). It is only when he has 'sacrificed' (6.2) him on stage that he feels justice has been done. He wears the 'lion-case' on stage for the rest of the play, a public sign that he has redeemed family honour. The Bastard in *King John* kills Austria unceremoniously off-stage, and when he enters he simply throws Austria's head aside and comments drily on the rising temperature. He doesn't mention the incident again, or talk about any honour or glory that might be seen to be attached to it. The Bastard in *King John* is not bound by conventional notions of duty and order; Shakespeare has divested this bastard of the trappings of familial allegiance, and, in so doing, created a character with real autonomy.

Shakespeare combines the tropes of rising temperature and rising flood waters towards the end of the play to suggest a developing crisis which tests out the inner strength of all characters. Most don't survive, or if they do they are broken or reduced. Constance, Eleanor, John, and Arthur all perish. Others are scarred by their experiences. The Bastard, on the other hand, seems to grow as others wilt, taking discomfort in his stride and rising to the occasion. As the battle with France draws near, the Bastard challenges John: 'if you be afeared to hear the worst [...] let the worst unheard fall on your head' (4.2.135-6). He strives to provoke the defeatist king into action: 'Away, and glister like the god of war!' (5.1.54). He stands up to the rebellious nobles, facing down Salisbury in words which foreshadow Othello: 'Your sword is bright, sir; put it up again!' (4.3.79). Moreover, the Bastard sees the grievous condition of the country, its people 'Left to tug and scramble, to part by the teeth [...] the proud, swelling state' (4.3.145-7). He foresees 'The imminent decay of wrested

pomp' (4.3.154) and is stimulated to a high passion when the nobles plan to put Lewis, the heir to the French throne, on the English one, turning their call for drums into a threat: 'Indeed your drums, being beaten will cry out; and so shall you, being beaten' (5.2.166-7). He employs extravagant metaphors, such as 'the deep-mouth'd thunder' and 'bare-ribb'd death' (5.2.173), to browbeat his enemies into weary submission, thus practising what he preaches at the outset of the play: that he will use the strategies of the elite and the authorities to extract what he wants from them, rather than the reverse.

So, while the Bastard might initially seem to be a prototype for the detached schemer who puts his own interests first, as the play unfolds and he gravitates towards centre stage and the heart of power, he is increasingly willing to take positions and make commitments. He finds the resources to bring about a satisfactory outcome to a dangerously unstable situation. As such, he shows the kind of leadership qualities which many might have craved. The restless spirit of the Bastard turns out to have a political and ethical anchor in the play. He traverses and transgresses exposed political, ideological, and inter-personal boundaries, but his mind and his feet remain nimble. In part, Shakespeare seems to be saying that this is because he is a bastard: that this ability and agility to adapt to circumstances, to achieve ends yet maintain principles, is something that the bastard, necessarily not confined to conventional familial and social boundaries, is in a unique position to realise. Even as he speaks the last patriotic but deeply ambivalent lines of the play, 'Naught shall make us rue if England to itself do rest but true' (5.7.128), foreseeing the future internecine warfare that will tear England's nobility apart in the future Wars of the Roses, he is heading off-stage, leaving another to uneasily wear the crown that the Bastard himself, with a more orthodox mindset, might have tried to make his own. In other words, we see his

refusal to pitch for kingship not as a failure or a submission to hegemony, but rather as a manifestation of his empowerment and of his uncanny knack of making the right call.

It is likely that many in the audience would have responded positively to the Bastard's voice, with its mix of scepticism, practicality, irrepressibility, and verve. They would probably have been happy, like the Bastard, to leave the ceremonial leadership role on a precarious stage to principal actors like Prince Henry, rather than to partake of the kind of poisoned chalice that kills John in *The Troublesome Raigne*, or to succumb to the fever of insecurity that destroys the eponymous ruler in *King John*. Nevertheless, being aware of the rising tide of doubt, debt, and paranoia, and seeing this reflected on the stage before them, some may have felt an urge to follow in the Bastard's footsteps, access the stage of history, and play a part in shaping their own and their country's future.