

‘NEAR MISSES WITH HISTORY’:
HISTORIOGRAPHY AND
REPRESENTATIONS OF BASTARDY
IN *KING JOHN* AND *LADY MARY*
WROTH’S *URANIA II*

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King John occupies a unique position among Shakespeare’s history plays. The character to whom the author assigns the largest role is not a real king in history but a dramatic invention, the Bastard. Though fictional, the Bastard is made a much more compelling character than the king who gives the play its title.

The Bastard is a natural son of Lady Faulconbridge, another fictional character, by King Richard Coeur-de-lion. The Bastard has much in common with self-serving illegitimate characters in Shakespeare’s later plays, such as Don John in *Much Ado About Nothing* (1598) and Edmund in *King Lear* (1605–6), but he is portrayed as sympathetic, intelligent, courageous and witty, as well as ambitious for advancement. What is particularly to be noted is his ability to analyze the political mechanism which functions in the war between England and France over the English throne. He observes and speaks accurately, as well as satirically, about where the real issues lie in the political conflicts and what outcome is brought about as a result of the political calculations of the kings on both sides.

And yet, in this play the Bastard is not merely a commentator, a role which is often given to an outsider of the realpolitik in Shakespeare’s history plays. He fights fiercely for the English cause, greatly contributing to sustain the English force against the French amidst the ever-shifting situation of the war. The warrior that King

John trusts most is apparently the Bastard, whom he assigns to ‘the ordering of this present time’ (V. i. 77) and asks to support his son Henry after his death. It is also the Bastard that, swearing his ‘faithful services/ And true subjection’ (V. vii. 104–5) to the new king, delivers the final speech in the play.

Another unique quality of the play is the strong presence of women; they aggressively interfere with politics both on the English and French sides. In Shakespeare’s English history plays, there appear some powerful women who assume the traditionally male roles of leading politics and wars, such as Queen Margaret and Joan La Pucelle in *Henry VI Part I*. Women in *King John* do not take such radical actions, but unlike most of the female characters in Shakespeare’s other history plays, they are described not simply as the victims of the ruthless and absurd human situations created by the male politicians and warriors. In particular, Queen Eleanor and Lady Constance heavily involve themselves in politics, forcefully insisting on the legitimacy of their sons’ claims to the English crown. They slander each other fiercely on the stage, calling their opponent’s son “bastard” (II. i. 122).

These women’s extraordinary energy comes from their strong sense of motherhood. In Act II. ii. their attack on each other’s son gets so escalated that they usurp the men’s struggle over royal legitimacy, reducing it to the oral battle between two women. In fact, their slandering gets out of the control of the male politicians on both sides. King Philip tells his son Lewis to put an end to this strange development of the male dispute over the English throne. Lewis tells the women: ‘Women and fools, break off your conference’ (II. i. 150). And yet Eleanor and Constance still continue their abusing, while Eleanor now starts to entice Arthur to take her side: ‘Come to thy granddam, child’ (II. i. 159).

The fight between his mother and grandmother gives Arthur so much depression that the child finally starts crying:

Good my mother, peace!

I would that I were laid in my grave:
I am not worth this coil that's made for me. (II. i. 163-5)

Arthur's tears provide another excuse to Eleanor and Constance to slander each other even more vehemently. Eleanor calls Constance, 'Thou monstrous slanderer of heaven and earth' (II. i. 173), while Constance calls the queen 'Thou monstrous injurer of heaven and earth' (II. i. 174). King John also tries to stop their fight, telling Constance, 'Bedlam, have done' (II. i. 183). Defying John's command, however, Constance goes on cursing Eleanor, 'a plague upon her' (II. i. 190), to which Eleanor responds, 'Thou unadvised scold' (II. i. 191). Finally, King Philip stops their battle: 'Peace, lady! Pause, or be more temperate.' (II. i. 195)

In *King John*, unlike most of Shakespeare's history plays, motherhood is depicted not as the site of victimization but as one to challenge the common assumptions about male patriarchy and to claim women's power to participate in men's making-history, by asserting their sons' right to the throne, whether they are legitimate or not. What makes this play even more unique is that it shows that those who contribute to the creation of the future of English history are not these powerful women in actual history, but Shakespeare's dramatic invention, Lady Faulconbridge.

This essay attempts to examine the significance of the mingling of historical realities and fictions in representing English history in the early modern period. Focusing on the representations of the bastards in *King John* and in Lady Mary Wroth's romance *Urania* Part II, the essay will show how this mingling of the two elements functions in these works to explore the possibilities of women's involvement in politics in sixteenth and seventeenth England in terms of the relationship between bastardy and motherhood.

1.

Among 'the embarrassing women' (Dusinberre 37-52) in *King John*, whose despair and vicious slandering against each other have

peculiar effects to undermine male authority, Lady Faulconbridge is a woman with the least power and has the briefest appearance on the stage. The only scene in which she appears is Act I Scene i, in which she verifies to the Bastard that he is the product of her adultery with King Richard Coeur-de-lion, not the elder son of Sir Robert Faulconbridge. She is at first reluctant to admit her marriage infidelity, but once the Bastard tells her that he has given up his legal legitimacy, yielding to his younger brother Robert the title and the lands of Sir Robert, Lady Faulconbridge proudly admits the truth:

King Richard Coeur-de-lion was thy father:
By long and vehement suit I was seduc'd
To make room for him in my husband's bed.
Heaven, lay not my transgression to my charge
That art the issue of my dear offence,
Which was so strongly urg'd past my defence! (I. i. 253-58)

In the earlier part of the scene, the Bastard and Robert Faulconbridge appeal to King John to resolve their quarrel over the Faulconbridge legacy, since, the Bastard says, his brother accuses him of bastardy, preventing him from inheriting the Faulconbridge estate. Again 'embarrassingly', it is not King John but Queen Eleanor that first recognizes the Bastard's resemblances to King Richard of Coeur-de-lion, and offers him the position of 'the reputed son of Coeur-de-lion,/ Lord of thy presence and no land beside' (I. i. 136-7), which the Bastard accepts with great joy and gratitude. Rendering legitimacy of every kind utterly meaningless, Queen Eleanor tells the Bastard: 'I am thy grandam, Richard; call me so' (I. i. 168). The Bastard endorses her defiance of legitimacy, saying 'I am I, howe'er I was begot' (I. i. 175).

Once official legitimacy is deprived of authority, Lady Faulconbridge is proud of having given her son the father who epitomizes ideal manliness. Trying to remove his mother's sense of shame with tenderness, the Bastard thanks her for creating him: 'Madam, I would not

wish a better father' (I. i. 260). After this scene Lady Faulconbridge never appears on the stage.

Thus, by inventing forceful dramatic figures, the Bastard and his mother, Shakespeare presents as meaningless and powerless every kind of orthodoxy, such as legitimacy, inheritance and female fidelity to the marriage bond, which had great significance in the actual history of early modern England. On the other hand, male potency inherited from a biological father is treated as of utmost importance in the play. The Bastard, though illegitimate, not only bears the physical resemblance to but also embodies all the fine male qualities of King Richard of Coeur-de-lion.

The inconspicuousness of Lady Faulconbridge makes a sharp contrast to the other assertive women in the play, whose social scale is much higher than hers. And yet the power of women is depicted in this play as related to the political state of their sons. Queen Eleanor overrules King John, even interrupting his official talk with the French ambassador Chatillon (I. i. 5). To legitimize her son's rule, she invents a new ideology of legitimacy based on his 'strong possession' rather than 'right' (I. i. 40).

However, after her ranting against Constance over the legitimacy of the kingship of their sons in Act II Scene i, and as King John's lack of political power is getting exposed, the queen's presence is gradually diminished. Her death is simply announced by the messenger (Act IV. ii. 120-1), though King John is emotionally shaken with the news. Lady Constance is also a powerful figure at first because of her forceful articulation of her despair of the fickleness of her friends over Arthur's claim to the English throne as well as of the injustice of fortune. As Juliet Dusinberre says, she eventually becomes 'the locus for the conflict of power and powerlessness which shapes the whole play' (Dusinberre 38). Yet her vehement utterance, as Dusinberre rightly points out, has an effect of alienating the audience (Dusinberre 40). After Arthur's death, she loses her sense and the messenger reports on her death, together with on Queen Eleanor's death: 'The Lady Constance in a frenzy died' (IV. ii. 122). Lady Blanche, who is married off

to the Dauphin and has no son yet, is depicted as a compliant, helpless victim of patriarchal history, although she is also extremely articulate of her grief and sense of injustice incurred by male political manipulations.

In the play where every source of authority, including ethics and royal genealogy, is made ambiguous, and therefore official legitimacy is reduced to a fiction created by each side of the English and the French, what is meaningful is only the male power represented by the body of the Bastard. Even Lady Faulconbridge's illicit sexuality is connived thanks to its creation of the Bastard, although, as Howard and Rackin argue, it indicates the potentiality of women's power to subvert the patriarchal social order, which is based on 'men's genealogical continuity and their genealogical claims' (131). Lady Faulconbridge, who is powerless by herself, is described as a woman who has a possibility of getting involved in politics through the power of her natural son. Though she never reappears after Act I Scene i, she may have survived the troublesome reign of King John; at least, unlike the cases of Queen Eleanor and Lady Constance, her death is not announced in the play. Even in the reign of the new monarch, she may maintain her political power through her Bastard son, who is entrusted by King John with Prince Henry.

Then, what role does the unhistoric figure, the Bastard, play in this English history play? As has been mentioned, his role is two-fold; to lead the English forces against the French king and the papal legate, promoting English patriotism as well as anticipating/representing Protestantism, and to provide the audience with viewpoints to perceive the problems of patriarchal history raised by the political machinations of 'these perjurd kings' (III. i. 33, 37). The Bastard's comments on the arbitrary political handlings of the leaders are insightful, drawing the audience's close attention to the sordid realities of politics in the play world. However, after all, the play is about the king who defied papal power for the first time on record in English history; the traditional Tudor Historiography presents John as a patriotic English king. In order to get theatrical power by exposing the ambiguity of

official legitimacy (Howard and Rackin 129) and at the same time to compromise with conventional Tudor historiography, the author needs, not historical accuracy, but ‘Near Misses with History’. Shakespeare probably drew his Bastard on the character of the Bastard in the anonymous two-part play, *The Troublesome Raigne of Iohn King of England* (1591), one of the likely sources of his play, but he expanded greatly the dramatic invention of this fictional character for these purposes.

As Findlay argues, Philip in *The Troublesome Raigne* personifies not only Protestant championship but also an idealised past of chivalry dominated by Richard Coeur de Lion, whose right as the ruler of the kingdom was indisputable. In the confusion of contemporary politics in *The Troublesome Raigne*, which lacks legitimacy, it is Philip, the bastard son of Richard Coeur de Lion, that upholds the chivalric ideals of the past. By contrast, in Shakespeare’s play, which also lacks the legitimate order, nostalgia for the chivalric past is totally absent. Confronted with the confusion of the present state, the Bastard becomes a character to rectify the social disruption, upholding traditional patriarchal values, and finally he is transformed to a hero who assists Prince Henry to protect proto-Protestant England against papal power. In order to bring in the social order in the hopelessly disorderly kingdom in the play world, Shakespeare had to resort to the power of the fictional figure of the Bastard. At the same time, through the figure of the Bastard, the play raises doubts about the ideology of patriarchal history built on political power of the eldest son born within matrimony.

Findlay thinks that the death of Arthur signifies the turning point for the meaning of bastardy in the play (Findlay 204). With Arthur’s death the order of legitimacy is completely broken down in the play. Philip, now Sir Richard, recognizes such a desolate situation:

How easy dost thou take all England up
From forth this morsel of dead royalty!
The life, the right and truth of all this realm

Is fled to heaven; and England now is left
To tug and scramble, and to part by th' teeth
The unow'd interest of proud swelling state. (IV. iii. 142–147)

The irony is that in the play world of this English history, all kinds of patriarchal authority are disrupted not only by powerful female historical figures who openly challenge them, but also by a fictional woman of less power, Lady Faulconbridge. She embodies the contradiction of patriarchal succession, as well as a woman's possibility to get involved in politics through her birth of an illegitimate son by a great man.

On the other hand, the Bastard in *King John* is an exceptional case. In Shakespeare's other plays, the typical attributes of bastardy are associated with wickedness and subversion (Neil 127–148). The foremost example is Edmund in *King Lear*. As Sokol argues, the public attitude toward bastard-bearing became increasingly intolerant at around the time when *King Lear* was written. Sokol thinks that the more austere attitudes, and with these a rapid fall in the rate of illegitimacy can be attributed to the combined effects of advancing Puritanism and the Elizabethan Poor Laws of 1576 (Sokol 161–2). This historical fact may have been reflected in the unfavourable depictions of bastards not only in Shakespeare's later plays but in the plays in the seventeenth century in general.

The date of the composition of *King John* is still open to question, but is mostly considered between 1595 and 1597. England in this period was ruled by Queen Elizabeth, whose possible bastardy and femininity both ran counter to the orthodox patriarchal concepts of national history. Moreover, the country at the time was riddled with anxiety over the issue of the heir after the ageing queen, whose legitimacy was after all not unequivocally accepted one. The Earl of Essex, of course, was not the legitimate heir, but was ascending greatly in power both at Court and among the public especially after his successful attempt to sack Cadiz in 1596.

If male potency, regardless of the lack of legitimacy, is the most important condition for ruling Protestant England, as described in

King John, Essex could have been a powerful candidate to succeed or at least to support the successor of Elizabeth. Findlay thinks that the Bastard's final words, 'Nought shall make us rue/ If England to itself do rest but true' (V. vii. 117–118), would have encouraged Shakespeare's original audience to acknowledge the reality that 'a woman and a bastard was ruling the country' (Findlay 208). If so, the Bastard's speech could have worked both to undermine and uphold Elizabeth's government; what matters most to establish Protestant England is not legitimacy but the capacity of the monarch to unify the nation. The Bastard in the play, therefore, because of his fictitiousness, could have embodied a convenient vehicle to provide the audience with one way of resolving, though fictionally, the political anxiety of the English people at the time. Thus, what is the most problematic of the fictional figure of the Bastard in this play is that he poses serious questions to legitimacy of the patriarchal social order, which endows with great power only the eldest son born within wedlock. Due to these radical elements of the play, Virginia Mason Vaughan calls *King John* 'Shakespeare's postmodern history play' (Vaughan 380).

2.

In 1621, about twenty-five years after *King John* was written, Lady Mary Wroth's *Urania* Part I was published. The publication of the romance caused uproar at Court because the work was regarded as a satirical *roman à clef*. Lady Mary had to ask the Duke of Buckingham to return to her the presentation copy she gave him, promising to get back all the copies in print. Probably due to this hostile response to her work, which she probably had never expected, the continued part of this romance, *Urania* Part II, remained as a holograph manuscript for nearly four centuries, published in 1999 for the first time. The date of the composition of the second part is open to question, but Margaret Hannay, who is now writing the first biography of Lady Mary Wroth, believes that it was written in around 1623, a period after she gave birth to her illegitimate son (Hannay). What distinguishes the continued part from the first part of *Urania* is the frequent

appearances of natural sons. What is more remarkable is that these characters are given the favourable descriptions in most cases.

Among the natural sons in *Urania* Part II, the most important figure is the Faire Designe, a man ‘designed to all worthy actes’ (*Urania* II 327). He is introduced by the author as the ‘most gallant and delicate youthe as eyes cowld possibly beeholde’ (*Urania* II 297), and as ‘the bravest of younge knights, the true mirroire of perfect knighthood’ (*Urania* II 324–25). And yet this young man is parentless and makes his self-introduction to Amphilanthus, the hero of the romance: ‘I knowe noe parents, nor have I a name more than the unknowne’ (*Urania* II 297). The Faire Designe adores Amphilanthus and wants to be knighted by him. His request being fulfilled, the Faire Designe attends Amphilanthus on his adventures, demonstrating his marvellous performances in various battles he fights together with Amphilanthus. Amphilanthus acknowledges his excellent knighthood, but the romance ends suddenly while the Faire Designe, again separated from Amphilanthus, is still fightening in the island to search for Amphilanthus, whom he has resolved never to leave if once found. The final line of *Urania* Part II reads that on hearing about the Faire Designe’s courageous acts, ‘Amphilanthus wa[s] extreemly’, and then the romance ends abruptly. Amphilanthus’ exact response to the Faire Designe’s excellent acts in the battle thus remains unknown forever.

Judging from the whole context of *Urania* Part II, the Faire Designe seems to be the natural son of Pamphilia, the heroine of the romance, who is the Queen of Pamphilia, by her first cousin/lover, Amphilanthus. Critics generally agree that the Faire Designe was modelled on a real historic figure, Mary Wroth’s natural son William by William Herbert the third Earl of Pembroke. Wroth’s portrayal of the Faire Designe as an embodiment of ideal manhood as well as a powerful supporter of Amphilanthus may have come from her strong desire to make William Herbert, Mary’s cousin/lover, acknowledge his parenthood of her son, though Herbert never did so. Herbert’s acknowledgement would have given Mary’s William, as in the case with the fictional figure of the Bastard in *King John*, various political

and economic privileges. The greatest one would have been the possibility that William could have inherited the enormous estate and wealth of William Herbert, who did not have a legitimate heir.

However, what Mary Wroth aimed through her descriptions of the *Faire Designe* seem not to have been limited to William's financial and political gains. As Josephine Roberts states, at the heart of *Urania* lies an ardent desire for the revival of the Holy Roman empire through Protestantism in Europe (Introduction to *Urania* I, xxxix–liv). Wroth casts her central male character Amphilanthus in the role of an emperor who unifies the western world. In the year 1621, when Wroth published *Urania*, such a representation of Amphilanthus would have been regarded as a sharp critique of King James, who had been unable to take a definite Protestant position, refusing to extend his political help to his daughter Queen Elizabeth of Bohemia and her husband Frederick, who were in their political crisis.

The significance of the interconnection between the public and private within *Urania* was investigated with great insight in pioneering studies by Paul Salzman, Mary Ellen Lamb and Helen Hackett, but in most cases it is connected merely to the issue of the complex interaction of gender and genre in the work. Yet, in view of the political climate of England in around 1621, the year of the publication of *Urania*, we need to think about the work through a new definition of political thought, as has been suggested by Susan Wiseman, particularly through the relationship between women's exclusion and their political involvements in early modern England.

The *Faire Designe* meets Amphilanthus for the first time, while accompanying the King of Bohemia on his trip from Morea, where Pamphilia's parents, the King and Queen of Morea, reign, back to his own country, which is Bohemia (*Urania* II 297). It is not only the *Faire Designe* that emphasizes the importance of the relationship of Bohemia to the characters in *Urania* Part II. In relation to Bohemia there appears another illegitimate son Andromarko, who is knighted by the King of Bohemia (*Urania* II 289). Andromarko is the Prince of Cyprus and a natural son of Polarchos King of Cyprus, who acknowl-

edges him. Andromarko, a counter-part of the *Faire Designe*, is also portrayed as a handsome, courageous fine youth as well as a great admirer of Amphilanthus. Amphilanthus appoints him as an attendant on the *Faire Designe* in fighting various battles against villains. As always the case with the characters in her works, Mary Wroth projects the real historical figures onto various characters in her fictions (Wynne-Davies, 'Literary Dialogues' 164–84). Andromarko seems to be another projection of her own natural son William. Polarchos' acknowledgement of him may have been intended to encourage William Herbert to acknowledge her son.

The King of Bohemia, Ollorandus, is the husband of Melasinda, the Queen of Hungary, and a good friend of Pamphilia and Amphilanthus. After attending Pamphilia's wedding to the King of Tartar in Morea, he departs for his home town Prague (*Urania* II 278). However, Ollorandus is attacked by the villains in the neighbourhood and Queen Melasinda is taken hostage. Informing Amphilanthus that the King of Bohemia is in need of help against villains (*Urania* II 297), the *Faire Designe* joins Amphilanthus to rescue the King and Queen of Bohemia. Amphilanthus is particularly pleased with the *Faire Designe*'s courageous acts in the battle.

When Wroth was writing the continued part of *Urania*, the King and Queen of Bohemia in actual history were indeed in need of help, in particular from Protestant England, in the face of the political and religious conflicts with the Habsburgs. While the marriage of Princess Elizabeth, King James' daughter, with the Elector Palatine Frederick, the future King of Bohemia, was under negotiation, William Herbert and Lucy Harington, the Countess of Bedford, who was a good friend of the Princess, greatly supported the militant Protestant Prince Henry to proceed with the marriage to promote the Protestant cause on the Continent (Wynne-Davies, *Women Writers*, 100–102). Robert Sidney, Mary Wroth's father, seems to have been also influential on the negotiation of the marriage. Most probably, Mary Wroth herself, under the influence of William Herbert and Lucy Harington, was helping to promote the marriage despite Queen Anne's strong opposi-

tion to it. Elizabeth married Frederick in February 1613 and left England for Bohemia in April 1613. Robert Sidney with his son William, Lady Mary's brother, and Lucy Harington accompanied the royal couple up to Heidelberg (Hannay, Kinnamon, Brennan, 101). Lucy Harington visited Elizabeth in Heidelberg in August 1616. Elizabeth and Frederick became the King and Queen of Bohemia in 1619, but soon after they fell into the serious trouble against the Habsburgs, which led to the Thirty Years War. Although the English Protestants continuously petitioned King James to extend his political and financial help to rescue his daughter in Bohemia, the king refused to make explicit his Protestant position by helping his daughter. The episode in which the *Faire Designe* strongly supports Amphilanthus to rescue the King and Queen of Bohemia seems to suggest his capacity, despite his illegitimacy, to provide strong help to Amphilanthus to fight for Protestantism on the Continent. Amphilanthus is generally identified with William Herbert, and throughout *Urania* he is called the Emperor of the Roman Empire, which was the title also accorded to the Elector Palatine in real history. Thus, by giving birth to her natural son William, Mary Wroth, though indirectly, acquired power to get involved in English politics at the time as well as to make clear her Protestant position under the disguise of the literary form of romance in *Urania* Part II.

3.

The descriptions of the Bastard in *King John* and the *Faire Designe* in *Urania* II both indicate the significance of the intermingling of fiction and history for the authors to make their points in the face of the conventional historiography or of social realities. What matters most in these works is whether the male characters possess male potency, not legal authority of the way in which they come to possess such a quality. Women such as Lady Faulconbridge or Pamphilia/Mary Wroth can exert great impact on the political state in the fictional worlds through their illicit, private relations with men of great capabilities, and by giving birth to their illegitimate sons by these men.

The power of women and the illegitimate sons both in *King John* and in *Urania II* challenges patriarchal history, which is maintained by male genealogy through the eldest son born within matrimony. The issue of bastardy represented in these works thus opens up possibilities of women's political involvement through the interconnection between the public and private in early modern England.

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