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### Children as the Power of Shakespeare

There is no doubt that Shakespeare has stood the test of time—if any collection of works can claim immortality, his collection of 154 sonnets, 37 plays, and 5 narrative poems is right up there with the Bible. Required reading for most secondary schools, he has become a household name more than perhaps any other author to date, whether that be for his dynamic characters, his classic plotlines, or the archaic language that high schoolers (and, let's face it, many others) struggle to comprehend. Due to his prevalence in today's culture, it may seem that experts have already picked over everything in Shakespeare's collected works more than enough times, whether it be plot points, major themes, major characters, or minor characters, but this is not the case, especially for some of his more overlooked texts and characters. Of some of his characters that literary critics have continuously passed by, there is a certain group that has received little wide-spread attention. While there has been some extensive research on numerous of Shakespeare's minor characters, some of his other characters, the minors, have been focused on less. Because they fly under the radar, Shakespeare uses these "minor" characters in order to subtly manipulate his audience, using them as a source of pathos in much the same way adults use children to manipulate audiences while silencing the actual opinions of the children they claim to represent. However, though he may often use children for this effect due to their fragility, Shakespeare also presents evidence why it is important to listen to children's voices, lending support to using Shakespeare as a way to empower young voices so they can be heard.

The amount of parts for children in Shakespeare's plays—Ann Blake counts at least thirty (Blake 293)—is a surprisingly high number, but it is because of how these innocent characters are so expertly exploited for Shakespeare's purposes that they remain so marginalized. Children are very dependent on their parents and other adults for protection and well-being, so adults usually become their voices—whether the children agree with their statements or not. Shakespeare's rhetoric mirrors how children's fragility is used as a source of power by adults when he uses children as a source of pathos or plot devices in his plays. While the societal roles of Shakespeare's children may vary, they are used similarly across social status. Joseph Campana explains:

While some of these children play predictable roles as messengers, dutiful sons and daughters, or mute ornamentation, many are subject to manipulation, minimization, erasure, or murder: the elusively absent presence of the changeling boy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, around which much of the play's action appears to revolve; the mystifying off-stage death of Mamillius in *The Winter's Tale*; the equally mystifying leap of Arthur (from a castle wall) to freedom, which results in his death, in *King John*; the murder of the precocious princes in *Richard III* and the threatened infanticides of Henry V; the regendering of the child of Henry VIII, announced, at first, as a son but then revealed to be the glorious Elizabeth; the introduction of the enigmatic children of Titus Andronicus's Lucius and Aaron, aggressively foregrounded in Julie Taymor's film *Titus*.  
(Campana 2)

In each of these instances, Shakespeare uses these children as a source of pathos or to move the plot along. The example of the changeling boy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is particularly good example of a child or child-like figure who is a manipulative plot-device tool throughout

the story. Oberon puts it succinctly when he says, “I do but beg a little changeling boy/ To be my henchman” (Shakespeare *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* 1.3.120-121). Not only does Oberon want to use this boy as a literal henchman/page/servant, but the changeling boy is also used as a tool to move the plot along. He never actually appears in the play, effectively erasing him while still using him for all the purposes needed.

Following this same line, Shakespeare uses children as a source of pathos in *Macbeth* when the titular character himself orders the death of MacDuff’s family. It is a common trope that the easiest way to show how terrible a person has become is to have them kill someone who is as innocent as a child. Shakespeare sets the reader up nicely for this pathetic scene with Lady MacDuff and her son discussing MacDuff, portraying the child as extremely precocious. He is a little silly in his discourse with his mother, but overall very endearing, including comments such as “Then the liars and swearers are fools, for there are liars/and swearers enough to beat the honest men and hang up them,” (Shakespeare, *Macbeth* 4.2.54-55), a naïve but astute observation and comment. This makes what happens a few lines later even more painful when the boy shouts to his mother, “He has killed me, mother. /Run away, I pray you. [He dies.]” (Shakespeare, *Macbeth* 4.2.81-82). The 1978 production of *Macbeth* directed by Phillip Casson only amplifies this concept, using the death of the child Macduff to solidify how horrible the actions Macbeth has ordered are. In this scene, the audience is endeared to the child’s unassuming appearance and high voice that testifies he has not yet left childhood just moments before the killer enters. When he does, the tense scene full of potential energy becomes kinetic—there is a flurry of movement, and then the boy speaks out in defense of his father. The previously stark scene full of blacks and whites is sharply contrasted with the red of the child MacDuff’s blood dripping down his back. To further emphasize how this child is used as a

source of pathos and as a plot device in this production, the child's death itself does not have as much impact without mother's echoing screams and her hands dipping into the child's blood—it is the adult's interaction with her dead child that makes this scene important, added upon by MacDuff's reaction in the next scene, “I have lost my hopes” (Shakespeare,



Fig. 1. Still from Haller, *Macbeth* (5:02)

*Macbeth* 4.3.26). The son only appears in one scene in the play, and he only appears in order to die. This gives the readers the sense of the atrocities Macbeth has committed and what a terrible person he has become. The son pulls at the audience's heart strings, creating sympathy for his father, MacDuff, (and disdain for his killer, Macbeth) and is used as a catalyst for MacDuff's future actions. Shakespeare has unfortunately fallen into the trap of only using children to further adult narratives, because “adults are more dramatically interesting than children, and the plays are concerned with them” (Blake 293). This does children a disservice, only further normalizing the use of their stories to catalyst the stories and/or power of the adults around them.

Not only does Shakespeare use this technique rhetorically to move his plays along, but the theme of using children to further adult narratives shows up explicitly in his sonnets as well. Children's innocence is exploited in a multitude of ways, one of which is when children are portrayed only as a “blank slate” to carry on the traditions of their parents. Shakespeare does this in his sonnets by discussing children as a kind of “immortality” for their parents— “Sonnets 1

through 17 are simply urging a young man to reproduce himself in a child” (McCarthy 89).

“Sonnet 17” is particularly vocal about the importance of having a child to carry on your legacy, stating, “But were some child of yours alive that time,/ You should live twice: in it, and in my rhyme” (Shakespeare, “Sonnet 17” 13-14). Shakespeare ties the kind of immortality he has had through his writing to the kind of immortality that a child brings; after all, “The *Sonnets*, as is generally acknowledged, harps on two forms of ‘immortality’: that granted by ‘immortalization’ in verse, and ‘immortalization through children” (McCarthy 14). But the child here is nothing more than a means to carry on the legacy of the parent—they serve no purpose on their own except to their one tied to the adult. It is because this figurative child is only used to serve the means of the speaker here—something all too common in Shakespeare and in the world at large. The child is almost an afterthought here, but the larger theme is not, and connects back quite well to the idea of written works bringing their own sort of immortality as well. In fact, his next sonnet, “Sonnet 18”, is one of his most immortalized sonnets, and speaks of more types of “eternities” when it says:

But thy eternal summer shall not fade,

Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st,

Nor shall death brag thou wander’st in his shade,

When in eternal lines to time thou grow’st. (Shakespeare, “Sonnet 18” 9-12)

This is not merely hyperbolizing the beauty of the subject, “The ‘eternall lines’ have a double sense: they are both the lines of the poem and the lines of descent, through which beauty is preserved from one generation to another,” (Gray 4-5). While it is typically Sonnets 1-17 that are grouped together under this theme, as “Sonnet 18” is directly after “Sonnet 17” in the sequence,

it does make sense that they would be discussing the same topic of how both children and verse follow the same “eternal lines,” serving the speaker and subject in immortalizing themselves. This is just one example of how often children are just seen as “mini-mes” of parents to carry on the family legacy, regardless of how they wish to use their own voices.

Luckily, Shakespeare’s works are not solely full of background character children who are largely ignored. One instance where Shakespeare demonstrates the danger of not listening to the voices of children is in one of his most famous plays, *Romeo and Juliet*. Although *Romeo and Juliet* is sometimes read as a cautionary tale, where the young lovers are criticized for their rash actions, it is a perfect example of young people trying to use their voices and being denied, leading to their ultimate demise. Young people will do whatever they can to get what they want—just because they are not full-grown adults yet does not mean that they have any less of a desire to act. The star-crossed lovers’ first solution is to get married in secret despite the enmity between their families, with Romeo declaring to the friar,

Then plainly know my heart’s dear love is set

On the fair daughter of rich Capulet.

[...] this I pray,

That thou consent to marry us today. (Shakespeare *Romeo and Juliet* 2.2.57-58, 63-64)

However, this plan doesn’t end up working out very well. Because the young lovers are forced to hide in the shadows for fear of their families finding out and punishing them, Juliet fakes her death to avoid marrying Paris. Unfortunately, the news does not reach Romeo in time, leading to Romeo’s famous line, “Thus with a kiss I die,” (Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* 5.3.120) when he drinks the poison, and to Juliet’s final death:

O happy dagger,

This is thy sheath! There rust and let me die.

[She stabs herself and dies]. (Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* 5.3.168-169)

This play is a tragedy for a reason. Though not explicit plot devices, as the whole story does revolve around these two, Shakespeare certainly uses their childlike innocence as a source of pathos to create that tragic ending here. Had the adults in their lives been able to make peace or had these two teenagers felt they could discuss their feelings with their parents in a rational manner, all this death and sorrow could have been avoided.

After looking at how Shakespeare demonstrated the importance of listening to children, it is important to juxtapose how children are used as pawns of adults and how they can use their own voices. An example fairly contemporary to Shakespeare's day, the day of Queen Elizabeth's coronation, shows how adults use children to gain political power. Carol Rutter writes that children lined the streets on the route to her coronation, explaining:

Setting children so conspicuously before the new queen's eyes, the City was alluding to, recasting this history, using children to elicit the hopes and fears of the nation, to figure real political arrangements allegorically and to voice messages her adult subjects wanted heard in public, the children carrying a burden of representation that evoked adult fantasy, adult memory – and served to focus cultural anxieties. (Rutter 5)

While it may appear here that these children were trying to help engage in political discourse, Rutter makes it clear that these children were not here to demonstrate their own ideas, but the “hopes and fears” of the adults. Children are a powerful tool for this—the cliché so oft repeated in movies says it all— “but think of the children!” However, children can be an even more

powerful force if their voices are listened to—and, like in the case of *Romeo and Juliet*, it could be disastrous not to.

Looking forward to current times, Alex Miles, an English Teacher major who will soon have to introduce Shakespeare to her future students, explains in response to why children need to learn about Shakespeare, “When I took Shakespeare, the class was all about leadership and what makes a good leader. Everyone should learn how to be a good leader or what qualities to look for in a person who is your leader,” (Miles). As Alex says, Shakespeare can be a tool to empower children and help them to create change if used in the right way, because “Children are politically important. They link the personal and the national, the biological and the dynastic” (Maguire 204). One organization that has embodied this challenge is the Viola Project. This is a project that’s aim is to “empower girls through the study and performance of Shakespeare,” (Eckinger 5), finding that “assuming the roles of Shakespeare’s characters allowed the girls to explore their identities and express themselves creatively,” (Eckinger 8). As the girls in the Viola Project rehearse their lines and put on performances for the community, they are following one the lead of Shakespeare’s role models for them, Viola, in order to explore their identities and become leaders themselves. It is also an expression of how young girls can reclaim something that was once meant only for men, as during Shakespeare’s time, there were no female actors on the stage. This empowerment of youth is increasingly important in a world where children are attempting to become more and more involved in political matters, such as the teens of the Parkland, Florida shooting did in 2018. Perfectly encapsulating the way children are fighting for change, a news article writes, “They may not be old enough to vote, but the high school students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas high school are impacting the political conversation about gun control in the U.S. in a way few adults have the bravery to do,” (Davis 1). They planned

classroom walkouts and a national march that countless students participated in around the country. As the article stipulates, children are stepping up to the plate where adults are not—whether that be because they disagree or because they are too afraid to, as the article suggests—but nevertheless it is important to recognize the impact that empowering children can have.

While these students may or may not have been directly influenced by Shakespeare, children can be empowered through Shakespeare literature, which then translates to all other areas of empowerment—but it is difficult for them to do that if adults do not let them. Children’s voices are important, and Shakespeare supports that adults listen to them—otherwise it could all end the same sticky way as *Romeo and Juliet*.

Though Shakespeare often uses a rhetorical version of “children should be seen, not heard,” by using his child characters as sources of pathos and plot devices to enhance adult narratives, he also presents some evidence that if children are not heard, they will be seen—and not in a good way. This speaks to the importance of empowering children with Shakespeare—though not every character within their immediate age group will be an ideal role model, there are plenty of Shakespeare’s characters that demonstrate the leadership that today’s youth are seeking after. With this, adults may still try to use children’s innocence, dependence, and fragility as manipulative tactics to gain power in their arguments, but children will be ready to defend themselves—both despite and because of how Shakespeare has portrayed them.

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