

Medieval children and mortality: from *Pearl* maiden to Princes in the Tower

LORRAINE C. ATTREED

THE DIFFERENCES between medieval and modern societies are often measured in terms of family relations. Modern society, for example, is enchanted by the idea of the child. On the other hand, seminal studies by Philippe Ariès and Lawrence Stone contend that childhood had neither place nor value in the medieval world. Ariès's theories in particular have been criticized since their appearance twenty years ago, but no one has pointed out how his views can be contradicted by examining the role of children in medieval dramatic and narrative poetry, and in fifteenth-century English politics.

Despite distressing and incontrovertible evidence of infanticide, child abuse, and strained child-parent relations, medieval society placed a high value on its children. Births initiated elaborate ceremonial preparations; child murder came to be equated in the courts of law with insanity. By the twelfth century, any living child reminded a Christian society of not only the infant Christ, but of the Holy Innocents as well. Nowhere is the distress over children's deaths better seen than in medieval drama, in particular the Abraham and Isaac plays of the Corpus Christi cycles, and the scenes which depict the Virgin Mary's grief over the loss of her son. Only a society which valued young lives would understand and cause such scenes to be included in this public form of literature. The autobiographical interpretation of the poem *Pearl*, written in the fourteenth century by the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, also includes the theme of a parent grieving over the loss of a young child.

In medieval politics, no English king was as affected by his culture's concept of children as was Richard III. The remainder of my paper concerns the impact of English society's concept of children upon Richard III's career and reputation. My sources include the pertinent fifteenth- and sixteenth-century chronicles, the report of 'foreign correspondent' Dominic Mancini, and Thomas More's satiric *History of King Richard III*. More specifically, I am interested in the rumours recorded in these histories: rumours which arose because of insecurity and doubt among the people at large; rumours which tried to explain the unknown by applying established cultural beliefs to what people believed was going on.¹

Edward IV died on April 9, 1483; by the end of the month, his son the new King was in the hands of his uncle Richard, named Protector of the twelve year old. The rest of the royal family did not so quickly acquiesce: the Queen, her younger son, and her daughters retreated to sanctuary in Westminster. Nevertheless, the uncrowned boy king reigned peacefully enough through the month of May. In June, however, that peace was shattered by Lord Chamberlain Hastings's arrest and execution, the removal of the younger prince from

sanctuary, and the introduction and dissemination of stories which cast doubt on Edward V's right to rule. By June 26, Uncle Richard had become King Richard, and the two princes vacated the Tower of London's royal apartments for more modest and servantless accommodations in the Garden Tower.² As the Italian visitor Dominic Mancini recalled six months after the event, '[Edward] and his brother were withdrawn into the inner apartments of the Tower proper, and day by day began to be seen more rarely behind the bars and windows, till at length they ceased to appear altogether,' not even to practice archery in the garden, as the *Great Chronicle of London* reported.³

Mancini is a contemporary source for the events surrounding Edward V's deposition. A successful author in his late forties, Mancini was probably sent to London in 1483 by the Archbishop of Vienne, Angelo Cato, physician and councillor to Louis XI, specifically to gather information about England. Mancini's modern editor doubted whether the Italian readily understood English, but as historian Alison Hanham has pointed out, 'it's not always strictly necessary for a reporter to speak the language in order to find out what's going on,' or, as I would add, to catch the mood of his company.⁴ His powers of observation are evident in a passage intriguing for a historian of childhood. Mancini recorded:

the physician Argentine, the last of his attendants whose services the king enjoyed, reported that the young king, like a victim prepared for sacrifice, sought remission of his sins by daily confession and penance, because he believed that death was facing him . . . He had such dignity in his whole person, and in his face such calm, that however much they might gaze he never wearied the eyes of beholders. I have seen many men burst forth into tears and lamentations when mention was made of him after his removal from men's sight, and already there was a suspicion that he had been done away with. Whether, however, he has been done away with, and by what manner of death, so far I have not at all discovered.⁵

'Tears and lamentations,' from 'many men,' over two children, the reign of one of whom would have brought to England only increased factionalism at home and loss of influence abroad? Who would believe that such an emotional display was probable; that, in the words of medieval historian Helen Maud Cam, 'people [could] become so upset over the fate of a couple of sniveling brats?'⁶

The Chancellor of France, for one, believed the report, or at least recognised it as plausible enough to serve to discredit the traditional enemy across the Channel. In January, 1484, in an address to the Estates-General, the chancellor praised the continuity of French succession to the crown, recently placed on the child Charles VIII's head. He contrasted it with England's sorry history of twenty-six rebellions since 1066, and her latest crime, child murder. Mancini's employer, Archbishop Cato, seems to have had access to the Chancellor, and may have told him what Mancini's report contained.⁷

The second continuation of the *Croyland Chronicle* is another near-contemporary source. Despite some faulty interpretation and analysis, the author, whoever he was, had a talent for getting his facts straight. He reported that while Richard and his Queen were in the north on their royal progress, probably during the month of September, 1483, other parts of the kingdom grew uneasy. Having noticed that the Princes had disappeared into the Tower, people in the south and west 'began to murmur greatly, and to form meetings and

confederacies to plan the princes' deliverance from captivity.' Many so feared that a 'fatal mishap' would befall the boys, that they advised that the Yorkist princesses be moved to the Continent, to ensure Edward IV's line.⁸

These rumours fed on themselves and on the boys' continued absence. They contributed to the general atmosphere of the rebellion, and probably gave rise to it in the first place. On the other hand, Audrey Williamson has argued that the rumours were created and spread directly to assist the Duke of Buckingham's rebellion and Henry Tudor's invasion.⁹ I think there is much to be said for a combination of the two views, but in support of Miss Williamson's theory, it is interesting to note that upon Buckingham's entry into the matter, the 'common fame' changed from plans to rescue living princes into a rumour of the Princes' violent death. The change was probably effected by the influence of John Morton, Bishop of Ely, the Duke of Buckingham's guest and prisoner in the latter's Welsh home.¹⁰ A successful rebellion needed some degree of public support: what better way to move people than to play upon, and exacerbate their fears and conjectures?

For my purposes in this study, the origin, chronology, and veracity of these rumours do not really matter. I do not intend to debate the likelihood of Richard's guilt or innocence. I am interested instead in the existence of rumour, and in the reasons why the medieval public as well as the nobility would be moved by the possibility of child murder. It is easier to explain why most of Europe jumped to the conclusion that the Princes were dead and Richard somehow involved.¹¹ The boys disappeared from view; other deposed monarchs, such as Henry VI, Richard II, and Edward II, did not survive for long after leaving the throne; and the argument *post hoc ergo propter hoc* has always been particularly tempting in cases like Richard's, in which ultimate achievement looks like the result of careful long-term planning. But none of these reasons can explain motivation.

What moved people to murmur against the able, adult Richard, and favour the young prisoners? The sanctity of primogeniture and uninterrupted inheritance may have led some of the nobles in particular to prefer the fledgling in the Tower to the hawk at hand. However, because the boys were denounced as illegitimate, support of bastards as heirs could set a dangerous precedent for the nobility. The thought that Richard struck at his own kin would have frightened a society in which everybody seemed to be related to everybody else. But I contend that Richard's attack on childhood alone offended his subjects during his own lifetime, and assured him the posthumous reputation of a monster. Despite all the tensions of child-adult relationships (tensions, and contradictions, I have taken no pains to hide in this paper), medieval children were valued. No matter how predominant its violence, every society imposes safeguards and limits beyond which its members cannot step without penalty. The Christian West in the Middle Ages honoured its children, as symbols of innocence, and as innocents themselves; in the sense of those Holy Innocents held in so much reverence and fear. He who ignored children's cultural role, or was even rumoured to have done so, could expect nothing less than his society's condemnation.

Just as it has been said that without humanism, there would have been no Reformation, so it is fair to say in this case that without the posthumous literary treatment, there would have been no legend of Richard III. In the chronicles and

histories written before Shakespeare, the Princes are uniformly depicted as innocent children, and Richard is implicated in their death. The marginalia *Innocentes, Mors Innocentium*, calls attention to the passage on the disappearance of the princes, as recorded in the Great Chronicle of London.¹² Polydore Vergil, writing c.1517, names Sir James Tyrell as the murderer of 'those babes of thyssew royall,' and describes Edward as 'innocent' and 'but a child in years.'¹³ Vergil conjectured that Richard deliberately spread news of the Princes' death in order to reduce support for Edward IV's heirs. Vergil concluded that Richard miscalculated society's depth of feeling for children:

whan the fame of this notable fowle fact was dispersyd through the realme, so great grieffe stroke generally to the hartes of all men, that the same, subdwying all feare, they wept every where, and whan they could wepe no more, they cryed out, "Ys ther trewly any man lyving so farre at enemytie with God, with all that holy ys and relygouse, so utter enemy to man, who wold not have abhorryd the myschief of so fowle a murder?"¹⁴

Thomas More was another writer who especially emphasised the innocence and youth of the Princes. He described the deed itself as 'the most piteous and wicked, I meane the lamentable murther of his innocent nephewes, the young king and his tender brother,' who are described elsewhere as 'those dolorous babes.'¹⁵ More created a long speech for Buckingham, in which the Duke argued that the younger prince should not enjoy the Westminster sanctuary because he does not have the discretion to understand its importance. Elizabeth Woodville pleaded her child's ill-health and pointed out:

in which case I meruelle greatly that my lord protectour is so disirous to haue [the prince] in his keping, where if the child in his sicknes miscarried by nature, yet might he runne into slaunder and suspicion of fraude.¹⁶

In other words, he who had the care of children took on a momentous responsibility which society expected him dutifully to fulfil. When he failed, as society judged Richard to have failed, he was accused of 'odious offenses and abominations against God and man,' the definition in Henry VII's bill of attainder against Richard, of the 'shedding of infants' blood'.¹⁷ As damning as they are inexact, these words summarise medieval culture's highest ideals, and its inevitable condemnation of those who ignored them.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Charles D. Ross's paper, 'Rumour, Propaganda, and Public Opinion during the Wars of the Roses,' presented at a conference at the University of Swansea in July, 1979, discussed the role of rumour in Richard III's reign, but I take full responsibility for the opinions on rumour presented in this essay.
2. For chronology and interpretation, see Charles T. Wood, *The Deposition of Edward V, Traditio* 31 (1975), pp.247-86, with the exception that the execution of Hastings occurred on 13 rather than June 20, a point which Professor Wood now accepts. He believes, however, that the change does not alter his basic interpretation, one which sees Richard's decision to seize the throne not as a long-term plot, but only as a response to Hastings' conspiracy.
3. Dominic Mancini, *The Usurpation of Richard III*, trans. C. A. J. Armstrong (2nd ed. Oxford 1969), p.93; A. H. Thomas and I. D. Thornley, eds., *Great Chronicle of London* (London 1938), p.234.
4. Mancini, *Usurpation*, pp.1, 10-11, 15; Alison Hanham cited in Julie Vognar, Alison Hanham: Correspondence with an Historian Who "Luffede Hym Nevr," *Loyauté Me Lie: Newsletter of the California Chapters of the Richard III Society* 2 (December 1980), 16.

5. Mancini, *Usurpation*, p.93.
6. Wood, *Deposition*, p.286.
7. Mancini, *Usurpation*, p.22.
8. *Ingulph's Chronicle of the Abbey of Croyland*, ed. and trans. H. T. Riley (London 1854), pp.490-1.
9. Audrey Williamson, *The Mystery of the Princes* (Gloucester, England 1978), p.99.
10. *Ingulph's Chronicle*, p.491; *Polydore Vergil*, p.194; Thomas More, *The History of King Richard III*, ed. R. S. Sylvester (New Haven 1963), pp.90-3.
11. The Dutch Chronicle of Holland, Zeeland and Friesland reported c.1500 that Richard had starved the princes, but it also conjectured that the Duke of Buckingham was involved in their death: Williamson, *Mystery*, p.132.
12. *Great Chronicle*, pp.xxii, 234, 236. Cf. Charles L. Kingsford (ed.), *Chronicles of London* (Oxford 1905), p.191: 'The Deth of the Innocentes.'
13. *Polydore Vergil*, pp.174, 188.
14. *Ibid.*, p.139.
15. More, *King Richard III*, pp.82-3.
16. *Ibid.*, pp.26-36.
17. John Strachey (ed.), *Rotuli Parliamentorum* (London 1767-77), Vol. 6, pp.275-8.