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“My All the World”: Constance, Motherhood, and Petrarchanism in Shakespeare’s *King John*

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Just before Constance leaves the stage for the last time in *King John*, she laments—knowing that the life of her son Arthur is in danger—that, in losing her son, she will be losing “my all the world” (3.4.104). Notably, the only other occurrence of this complete phrase in Shakespeare’s canon is in Sonnet 112, where the speaker refers to the Fair Youth as “my all the world” (line 5). By virtue of this verbal echo alone, Constance is uniquely aligned with the speaker of Shakespeare’s sonnets to the Fair Youth, but this brief passage is just the beginning of an echo chamber of phrases that reverberate between Constance and the speaker of these sonnets. Like the speaker of Shakespeare’s sonnets, and like Petrarch and other speakers in the tradition inspired by his *Rime sparse*, Constance remains intently focused on the physical beauty of her beloved and on the value that beauty brings to her. Indeed, in the line she speaks just before “my all the world,” Constance refers to Arthur as “my fair son” (103), a phrase that both suggests his connection to the Fair Youth and emphasizes his beauty. While Constance’s aims are not erotic, they are conventionally narcissistic. In *King John*, as I demonstrate in this essay, Arthur is Constance’s Petrarchan beloved, and she, the speaker of a “sequence” devoted to him.

Constance’s Petrarchan insistence in her son’s beauty is her means of pursuing power and agency in the politically fraught world she inhabits. Scholarship on Constance and the other women characters in *King John* specifically has traditionally pointed to their interest in, but seemingly exaggerated lack of, power in this play.¹ Those scholars who have attributed agency to the women have often found these characters’ pursuit of power to be relatively or completely ineffective. For example,

¹ In her article “I Trust I May Not Trust Thee,” Levin outlines some of these early interpretations of Constance’s character. For example, M. M. Reese suggests that Constance is meant to be seen as unsympathetic and as lamenting “overmuch” (qtd. in Levin 230). In “Embarrassing Women,” Juliet Dusinberre also explores some early analyses of Constance’s character that emphasize her powerlessness (40).

while Carole Levin acknowledges that "the women characters are the most clear-sighted and honest," she laments that they "are powerless to change the course of events" and have merely learned that "the world of *King John* is a world they cannot trust" (Levin 230). More recently, Gina Bloom has analyzed the ways in which Constance finds and asserts agency effectively through her voice, whose source is the living breath of her body. While Constance does employ her voice as a means both to express her grief and to register her resistance, she ultimately pursues power through her son, and this pursuit involves not just her living, breathing voice, but also her Petrarchan construction of Arthur through that voice as she attempts to empower herself through him.

In the last few decades, scholarship on Petrarchan sonnet sequences has emphasized the narcissistic, controlling stance of the speaker, a trend that counters earlier critical approaches that sympathized with the Petrarchan speaker. Thomas P. Roche explores this narcissistic stance through the lens of Petrarch's Augustinianism and claims that the plight of the Petrarchan speaker is that of his own "self-indulgence," for the poet-lover turns "his passion into an idol, a goddess" (viii). Subsequent scholarship has explored this self-indulgence as an assertion of (primarily) male power. The Petrarchan speaker employs the beloved as a means to his own ends, and those ends are typically the poetry he creates through writing of his love for her. Aileen Feng summarizes the trajectory whereby, in the *Rime sparse*, Petrarch turns "person to image, image to possession, and possession to projection" (4). Because the speaker cannot achieve the attainable beloved, he may create an idealized image of her in his mind, experience passionate feelings toward and about that image, and produce poetry based on those passionate feelings. Cynthia Marshall summarizes this phenomenon, whereby "the Petrarchanist wins (poetry) by losing (the beloved)" (67).

However, some critics have noted that the power dynamics are less stable than this theory would suggest. Heather Dubrow, for example, has demonstrated that the paradigm of Petrarchism as sign of male power is based on the idea of the stability of gender categories (11). She argues that many male speakers express uncertainty about their own agency, and that the silence of the beloved does not necessarily signal powerlessness

(125, 134).² Indeed, as Dubrow notes, Mary Wroth's *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* provides an example of a sonnet sequence that subverts expectations of the genre by employing a female speaker who achieves agency and power while speaking from the stance of a Petrarchan lover (159). Viola/ Cesario's early attempts to win Olivia for Orsino in *Twelfth Night* provide a parallel example, transported to the early modern stage: Viola, a woman dressed as a man, employs Petrarchan language as she seeks to woo another woman on a man's behalf (1.5). Through her use of this language, Viola achieves power over Olivia, who becomes enamored of the bearer of the love message.

Petrarchan language, then, may signal the instability, rather than the stability, of both gender categories and power dynamics; Constance both embraces and suffers from that instability as she strives for power. In this essay, as I establish that Constance employs Petrarchan language, and often language that directly echoes the speaker of Shakespeare's sonnets, I will demonstrate that she does achieve power over her son as she objectifies him. Through her narcissistic Petrarchan gaze, Constance embraces the idealizing and idolizing stance of the Petrarch speaker who sees himself in his beloved. Because of the fragility of her position as woman and mother, however, Constance is ultimately unable to turn the idolizing of her son into the political power she had sought to attain through him.

Constance's employment of Petrarchan language toward and about her son mirrors her maternal stance. She emphasizes her biological link to Arthur throughout the play: he was conceived in her "bed" (2.1.124), he comes from his "mother's womb" (3.1.44), his "birth" was remarkable (3.1.50-51), he has been beautiful since the day he was "born" (3.4.81). By insisting on her biological link to him, Constance also reiterates her link to the power that seems within his reach. He is, the repetition insists, a part of her, an extension of her being. Thus, when she looks at him, she sees herself. The speaker of Shakespeare's sonnets makes this same connection between the Fair Youth and the Fair Youth's mother when the speaker asserts that the Fair Youth will become his mother's "glass" in

² See, for example, Brian Pietras, "Fletcher's Promiscuous Poetics," who reads *The Faithful Shepherdess* as a "critique of the Petrarchan success narrative" (59).

which she will recall her own youth (Sonnet 3, line 9). The gaze of the Fair Youth's mother, like that of the speaker himself, is narcissistic; Constance is both reflected mother and Petrarchan poet of Arthur's beauty³.

Constance as mother and Constance as Petrarchan speaker are, then, tightly interconnected in the play. The facts that she has given birth to him and that she idealizes and objectifies him as a Petrarchan beloved give her power and agency in relation to him. Indeed, Constance establishes this link herself when she claims that if he were "ugly,"

... then I should not love thee, no, nor thou
 Become thy great birth, nor deserve a crown.
 But thou art fair, and at thy birth, dear boy,
 Nature and Fortune joined to make thee great. (3.1.49-52)

Arthur's beauty, Constance's motherhood, Constance's love, and Arthur's desert of a crown merge into a single powerful and inextricably linked cluster of associations in these lines. Because he is "fair," he can be her object of adoration, her Fair Youth; because she gave "birth" to him, she may take part in his greatness, may partake of the power that the crown would give him.

Constance focuses almost exclusively on Arthur's physical appearance as opposed to his behavior or emotional well-being throughout the play. Initially, her interest in his appearance is directed toward a defense of his paternity. When Eleanor questions that paternity, Constance insists that Arthur is "Liker in feature to his father Geoffrey/ Than thou and John" (2.1.126-27).⁴ In a gesture that mirrors the recognition of Philip, the Bastard, as the son of the deceased Richard I

Cf. Naomi Miller, "Playing 'the mother's part,'" on maternal imagery in Shakespeare's Sonnets. The speaker of the procreation sonnets of course goes on to indicate that the Fair Youth and his future wife would be able to see themselves in their offspring, as well.³

⁴ In a parallel blazon, King Philip also argues for the validity of Arthur's claim to the throne through his resemblance to his father: "Look here upon thy brother Geoffrey's face," he says to John, "These eyes, these brows, were moulded out of his./ This little abstract doth contain that large/ Which died in Geoffrey, and the hand of time/ Shall draw this brief into as huge a volume" (2.1.99-103).

through his appearance, Constance seeks to validate the royal claims of her son through his physical features.⁵

Constance's appeals through her son's appearance expand into a series of images that figure Arthur's features in distinctly Petrarchan terms. For example, early in the play, when Arthur is embarrassed by his mother's mocking of Queen Eleanor as Constance urges his claim to the throne, Arthur begins to weep. It is Eleanor who alerts Constance to the fact that her son is weeping, after which Constance rhetorically glosses Arthur's tears as "heaven-moving pearls" and "crystal beads" (2.1.170). These tears, says Constance, will serve as a "fee" and a bribe to heaven to provide Arthur with "justice" and to bring "revenge" on Eleanor (2.1.170-71). Tears as pearls or eyes as crystal appear in Shakespeare's canon primarily in erotic and/ or Petrarchan contexts. One might think, for example, of the crystal eyes of the women in *Love's Labour's Lost* (4.3.140), the crystal eyes and tears of Venus in relation to Adonis (*Venus and Adonis* lines 491, 633, 962-3, 979-80), or the "crystal eyes" of the speaker in Shakespeare's Sonnet 46 (line 6). Constance takes the stance of the Petrarchan speaker as she distills her son's emotions into his tears, and then frames those tears as jewels. Furthermore, by suggesting that those tears will bribe heaven to get revenge on her political enemy, Constance demonstrates her tendency to objectify her son (or his physical features), and then employ that objectification in her pursuit of political agency.

Similarly, upon hearing that Blanch and Lewis are to be married, Constance insists on Arthur's beauty in conventionally Petrarchan terms. She claims of Arthur that "Of nature's gifts thou mayst with lilies boast/ And with the half-blown rose" (3.1.53-54). The linking of lilies and roses, white and red, is a distinct convention of the language of Petrarchan love, and not the language of motherhood. From the combination of white and red in medieval iconography,⁶ to Petrarch's descriptions of Laura's blushing cheeks, to the multiplicity of references to these combined colors in ensuing early modern love sonnets and

⁵ Joseph M. Ortiz, "By the Book: Blazoning the Subject in Shakespeare's History Plays," demonstrates that "the establishment of Philip's true paternity [1.1] is staged as an act of blazoning" (125). Indeed, *King John* seems obsessed with intersections of appearance and power.

⁶Cf. Robert J. Blanch, "White and Red in the Knight's Tale," pp. 176-77, for a discussion of this iconography.

descriptions of lovers, white and red merge again and again in the context of erotic or Petrarchan love. Indeed, Shakespeare's speaker explores this convention at length in Sonnet 98, in which the speaker sees the actual lily and rose as merely imitating the white and red of his beloved's features. Constance is unique among the mothers in the history plays—and, indeed, among Shakespeare's women more generally—to employ this combination of flowers when speaking of a son.

Constance's Petrarchism is an outgrowth of her motherhood, but her stance as Petrarchan speaker and her expected role as nurturing mother come into conflict as she strives for power. Elsewhere in Shakespeare's history plays, Petrarchan language is typically employed by male characters who woo women with the purpose of forging political alliances through arranged marriages. In *King John*, for example, Lewis takes the stance of the Petrarchan wooer in relation to Blanch, with whom he has been matched by his father and King John. It is John who stands to gain the most from this marriage, and it is he who initially establishes the Petrarchan construct whereby Lewis would read love in the "book of beauty" that is Blanch (2.1.485). When Lewis looks into Blanch's face upon his father's prompting, he claims to see "myself,/ Drawn in the flattering table of her eye" such that he can now "love myself" (2.1.501-3). Lewis embodies the narcissistic Petrarchan lover as he celebrates the self he sees reflected back at him by Blanch's eye. Through Blanch, Lewis connects himself to the political aspirations of his father and King John, just as Constance finds her source of empowerment in Arthur.

Constance's Petrarchan appeals also mirror those of Richard III in a way that exposes the rift between her political aspirations and her maternal role. Richard employs Petrarchan love language both when he attempts to woo Anne and when he seeks to win the hand of Elizabeth through her mother. Anne's eyes, he claims, have "infected mine" (1.2.149) or, when she claims that she will tear her cheeks with her nails, he claims, "As all the world is cheered by the sun/ So I by that [Anne's beauty]; it is my day, my life" (129-30). When he attempts to win the promise of the young Elizabeth's hand from her mother, he calls her "Virtuous and fair, royal and gracious" (4.4.205). The verbal echoes of Constance in Richard's lines are evident here. Also evident is the fact that Constance takes a similar role to Richard in her pursuit of power through

the one she idealizes and "woos." Both Richard and Constance seek to shore up their power through the individual they objectify through Petrarchan language.

As Constance focuses on the rhetorical idealization of her son, though, others in the play chide her for what they perceive to be her lack of attentiveness toward Arthur, her failure to nurture her son. Eleanor, for example, sarcastically mocks Constance by suggesting her lack of empathy for Arthur: Constance is (not) a "good mother" when she speaks against Geoffrey (2.1.132). Subsequently, Eleanor claims that "his mother shames" Arthur when he weeps (2.1.166). Even King Philip asserts, in Constance's final scene, that "You are as fond of grief as of your child" (3.4.92). On the arranged wedding day of Blanch and Lewis, Constance herself hints that she values her role as political agent over that of nurturing mother to Arthur. As she laments the demise of her fortunes that would result from this marriage, Constance articulates her personal and political disappointment by urging "wives with child" to "pray that their burdens may not fall this day,/ Lest that their hopes prodigiously be crossed" (3.1.89-91). Constance's appeal suggests that, from her perspective, withholding childbirth and delaying motherhood might be preferable to giving birth to a star-crossed son.

Other mothers of the history plays position themselves against those who use Petrarchan rhetoric for political ends, and these women also tend to deemphasize the physical appearance and beauty of their living children. In the face of Richard's Petrarchan appeals, Queen Elizabeth insists that she will claim that her daughter is illegitimate, or "stain her [young Elizabeth's] beauty," to prevent Richard from taking her (4.4.207). Similarly, the Duchess of York in *Richard II* insists to her husband that she loves her son even though he looks "Not like to me, or any of my kin" (5.2.109); she rejects narcissistic infatuation in favor of her son's life. Queens Margaret and Elizabeth of the first tetralogy comment on their young children's appearance only *after* the children's deaths; they use images of their children as "fair" or as "unblown flowers" to fuel their curses rather than to prop up their power.⁷

⁷Queen Margaret, for example, describes her murdered Edward as a "sweet" "plant" (3 *Henry VI* 5.5.62) and a sun with "bright outshining beams" (*Richard III* 1.3.264, 267). Similarly, Queen

Constance's linking of Arthur's beauty with his claim to power is tenuous at best. Like the Petrarchan poet who struggles with the potency of his own voice, Constance betrays the fragility of her position through imagining the deterioration of Arthur's body. As she strives to maintain her hopes of political power, Constance seeks to contain that which will inevitably happen to Arthur's body—the fact that his beauty will fade. As she defends his claim to the throne when the marriage of Blanch and Lewis is announced, Constance creates an inverse blazon of features Arthur does *not* possess—ugliness of which he is *not* possessed. In her odd and expansive passage—which takes the imagined unsightly Arthur apart feature by feature—Constance claims to him:

If thou that bid'st me be content wert grim,
Ugly, and slanderous to thy mother's womb,
Full of unpleasing blots and sightless stains,
Lame, foolish, crooked, swart, prodigious,
Patched with foul moles and eye-offending marks,
I would not care, I then would be content [not to press his
claim]. (3.1.48)

In a gesture that both echoes and subverts the blazon, Constance dismembers the parts of the imaginary "ugly" body of her son. Through this disassembling, she claims, possesses, and then attempts to dispose of those potential features through Petrarchan rhetoric.⁸

As Arthur's fortunes fall, however, Constance becomes unable to fend off her fears of his physical deterioration and loses hope in her ability to champion that beauty for purposes of political power. When he is taken prisoner, Constance insists that he is the most "gracious creature" ever "born" (3.4.81), but she fears that:

But now will canker-sorrow eat my bud
And chase the native beauty from his cheek,
And he will look as hollow as a ghost,

Elizabeth refers to her murdered sons as "[unblown] flow'rs, new-appearing sweets!" (*Richard III* 4.4.10).

⁸ Cf. Sonnet 11, a procreation sonnet in which the speaker makes a very similar gesture, "Let those whom Nature hath not made for store,/ Harsh featureless and rude, barrenly perish:/ Look whom she best endow'd she gave the more;/ Which bounteous gift thou shouldst in bounty cherish." (Sonnet 11, lines 9-12)

As dim and meagre as an ague's fit. (3.4.82-85)

As she has throughout the play, Constance focuses on Arthur's physical appearance, but now with an increasing certainty that it will become tainted. Her Petrarchan "bud"—the lilies and roses she had championed—will be eaten by a "canker" (note the echoes of Shakespeare's sonnets); his "cheek" will no longer have its "native beauty," he will *look* like a ghost. Whereas the earlier blazon of unsightly features took on an air of defiance, this one comes in the form of resignation.

Constance's "sequence" to Arthur ends more like that of the speaker to the Fair Youth than that of Petrarch to Laura. As the speaker in Shakespeare's Sonnet 126 asserts that Nature will have to render the Fair Youth to Time, so Constance anticipates Arthur's deterioration and death. Predicting his death before it happens, Constance imagines meeting Arthur in heaven and not recognizing him because of his imagined disfigurement: "I shall not know him" in the "court of Heaven," she laments (3.4.88).⁹ She has so objectified Arthur that she seems to have no sense of an emotional connection with him, no faith in her ability to recognize his attributes beyond his physical beauty. Even in this moment of despair, when she asserts her fear of their permanent separation, she speaks in objectifying language: she will not "behold" her "pretty" Arthur again (3.4.88-89). In her imagination, Arthur is not Petrarch's transfigured Laura coming to him in a dream, urging him to "raise your wings from earth" (Poem 359, line 39); he is a diminished version of himself, a version in which she is afraid to see her own reflection.

Constance's focuses on her son's beauty as a pathway to power had been costly for her son. Even from the beginning, in the presence of his mother, Arthur describes himself as having a "powerless hand" in the political negotiations that are underway (15). Each time Constance insists to those nearby that her son deserves the crown, Arthur asks his mother

⁹ Isabella's response to Horatio's death in Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* serves as an interesting point of contrast here. Upon her son's death, Isabella claims that "My soul hath silver wings,/ hat mounts me up unto the highest heavens;/ To heaven, ay, there sits my Horatio,/ Backed with a troop of fiery cherubins,/ Dancing about his newly-healed wounds,/ Singing sweet hymns and chanting heavenly notes,/ Rare harmony to greet his innocence" (3.8.15-21).

to stop her appeals; in her response to these requests, Constance only escalates her rhetoric about his physical appearance or beauty as proof of his claim to the throne. When Constance initially argues with Eleanor over Arthur's claims, Arthur wishes, "I would that I were low laid in my grave,/ I am not worth this coil that's made for me" (2.1.164-5), yet Constance ignores him and usurps his weeping as she appeals to the revenge his tears will bring. Later, when Constance lambasts Salisbury for bringing the bad news of the marriage of Lewis and Blanch, Arthur begs his mother, "I do beseech you, madam, be content" (3.1.42), but she only intensifies her rhetoric about Arthur's beauty. As Constance insists on his kingship more forcefully, the rift between mother and son, between Petrarchan speaker and beloved, only widens.

Early in the play, then, Arthur's voice is subordinate to and silenced by that of his mother. Even when he is first taken prisoner, his initial concern is that: "O, this will make my mother die with grief" (3.3.5). When he is separated from her, however, fighting for his eyes in the presence of Hubert, Arthur begins to find his own voice, even his own identity. Whereas his mother had insisted on his paternity for purposes of power, Arthur separates himself from those claims by expressing a desire to be Hubert's son, and thereby loved (4.1.24). Arthur becomes more than his appearance and a conduit for his mother's power when he is on his own; he becomes a subject seeking paternal love (even with the suggestion of his own illegitimacy) as opposed to the objectifying love of his mother.

Whereas Constance had disassembled Arthur's potential "ugly" body in her inverse blazon, Hubert threatens to dismember Arthur's very real body on stage by burning out his eyes. The language of dismemberment pervades the passages surrounding the intended torture and murder of Arthur. His eyes, which had earlier been used as proof of the fact that he was Geoffrey's son (2.1.100) and bearers of pearl-like tears (2.1.169), are to be "put out" (4.1.56).¹⁰ Additionally, Arthur himself requests that Hubert "cut out my tongue/ So I may keep mine eyes" (100-101). And finally, just before his final leap, Arthur hopes that he will not

¹⁰ The repetition of this threat is notable: "Must you with hot irons bur out both mine eyes?" (38); "Will you put out mine eyes?" (56); "with hot irons must I burn them out" (59); "My eyes are out" (73); "lose your eyes" (90).

"break my limbs" (4.3.6) in the fall. The threat of Arthur's dismemberment and bodily deterioration, raised earlier by his mother, becomes an imminent possibility on the stage.¹¹ The potentially fragmented body on stage mirrors the fragmentation of Constance's hopes, and arguably the fragmentation of the country as well.

Arthur attempts, from the subject position to which we are privy in the absence of his mother's gaze, to hold his body parts together, or at least to control what happens to them, through his rhetoric. He expresses a desire "to look on" Hubert, rather than to be looked upon (103). He asserts his authority to speak—"Let me not hold my tongue, let me not, Hubert" (4.1.99)—as he begs to keep his eyes. He attempts a bargain with Hubert to trade eyes for tongue (4.1.100). He asks of the "Good ground" that it "hurt me not!" (4.3.2) when he leaps from the wall and, recognizing that he may die, he requests that "England keep my bones" (4.3.10). In his distance from his mother's gaze, Arthur finds his voice and seeks to reclaim at least rhetorical control over his body. For a moment, he unsettles our expectations of the silent Petrarchan beloved as he makes his voice heard and attempts to reclaim his body. His attempts themselves, though, only betray the instability of both the body and the blazoning language that has been employed in an attempt to control that body.

When Arthur dies after his leap from the wall, those around him usurp this attempted control and gloss the significance of his life and death. Philip sees Arthur's dead body as a sign of something greater, as "The life, the right and truth of all this realm" (4.3.144), the goodness of England that has now fled to "heaven" (4.3.145). Philip's idealization of Arthur within the play perhaps points to Arthur's representing at least the hope of political unity, of something salvific resulting from Constance's motherhood and the hopes she had planted in him. As Jean-Christophe Mayer suggests of Arthur's death, he becomes "perhaps the fantasy of a monarch who would be able to unite the hybrid nation beyond its political and religious differences" (99).

¹¹ See Dickson, "The Blazon and the Theater of War," on the tension between "the part and the whole," including human bodies and the body politic, in the English history play (139).

Those who find Arthur's body, though, focus on the physical beauty of that body as they insist on its attractiveness. Pembroke, for example, suggests that death is "made proud with pure and princely beauty" (4.3.35), while Bigot asserts that Arthur's "beauty" is "too precious-princely for a grave" (4.3.39-40), that Death is "made proud with pure and princely beauty!" (4.3.35). Later, Philip insists that the clay of his dead body is "beauteous" (4.3.137). The observers' language that enwraps the deceased Arthur in Petrarchan rhetoric echoes Constance's language of his living body earlier in the play. In his death and through the observers' language, Arthur has become the embodiment of what his mother had unwittingly fought so hard for from the beginning: he is both completely beautiful and completely silent. Arthur's body foregrounds the literal and extreme consequence of the objectifying stance of Petrarchism: the beautiful, silenced body of the beloved on display.

The news of Arthur's death comes after that of Constance, but one of Constance's final gestures before she leaves the stage is to speak of a mental image she has created of Arthur—an image that replaces her actual son in her imagination. Having divided his image from his person, and believing that the beauty of the actual person is dissolving, she clings to the image. Gordon Braden notes the capacity of the speaker in Shakespeare's sonnet sequence to delude himself even when he knows he is doing so, to forge a "whole episode, from despair to recovery," "within the terrain of the isolated thinking mind" (172). Even so, Constance consciously delude herself about her son's plight—even when she knows she is sane and deluding herself—by fixating on the image she has impressed on her mind (an image she calls "Grief") rather than on the actual events surrounding her child. As she asserts to Philip and Pandulph in her last moments on the stage:

Grief fills the room up of my absent child,
Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,
Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words,
Remembers me of all his gracious parts,
Stuffs out his vacant garment with his form;
Then have I reason to be fond of grief? (3.4.93-98)

Bereaved of Arthur's physical presence, Constance creates a mental image that replicates his "pretty looks" and his "gracious parts," and provides her with a visual object for her fondness. As the speaker of Shakespeare's Sonnet 30 seeks consolation by summoning up "remembrance of things past" (line 2), so Constance seeks consolation in her embodied grief—a grief that still focuses almost exclusively on the physical attributes of the child now absent from her sight.

Constance's last words in the play, though, are bleak. They are about the loss of her son, but even more potently about her own losses through him. As she leaves the stage, she laments the loss not only of "my all the world" but also of Arthur as "my food" (3.4.104)—that which has nourished her, and upon which she had fed. Like the speaker of Shakespeare's Sonnet 75 who loses his "food to life" in the absence of the beloved (line 1), Constance loses the object of her consumption.¹² Her final lines in the play emphasize the losses to *her*—"My boy, my Arthur, my fair son,/ My life, my joy, my food, my all the world/ My widow-comfort, and my sorrows' cure!" (3.4.103-5; italics mine). Arthur had been an object through which Constance has created of a Petrarchan image, a vessel for her political longings. Knowing that his death is becoming inevitable, Constance leaves the stage stripped of all that had nourished her and all that had given her hope.

Constance's options in the world of this play have been limited, for she is, as she repeatedly reminds us, linked to the destinies of the men to whom she is or has been related; she is both a widow and a mother. Rather than merely bow to the forces closing in on her, forces that threatened to destroy both her and her son, Constance chooses to embrace the stance of the Petrarchan speaker in relation to Arthur—a stance typically associated with erotic love, but also with the hope of empowerment. Constance chooses the language of Richard III over that of Elizabeth, and, like Richard, she achieves power over her beloved for a time. Also, like the speaker of Shakespeare's sonnets, she creates a

¹² Elsewhere in Shakespeare's works, when a character speaks of another—or the sight of another—as "food," it is a lover speaking of a beloved, typically, a longed-for but not-yet-acquired beloved. For example, Antipholus of Syracuse speaks of Luciana as his "food" (*Comedy of Errors* 3.2.6), and Julia longs for the "food" of Proteus's looks (*Two Gentlemen of Verona* 2.7.15, 17). One might remember Sidney's Astrophil, too, who, despite the fact that his beloved's "virtue bends that love to good," claims that his "Desire still cries: 'Give me some food'" (Sonnet 71, line 14).

mental image of a beautiful beloved in which she sees herself and through which she strives for power. But unlike that speaker, who gives birth to the "burthen" of his love in the form of "books"—his poetry (Sonnet 23)—Constance is left with only the vivid mental image of her Grief. Her potential "poem," her idealized son, who had once embodied all of her hopes, has become in the end just a beautiful, lifeless body laid out on the stage.

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