



TLC SHOWCASE

WENDY JOHNSON

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Introduction to *The Traitor's Son*

Set during the Wars of the Roses, 'The Traitor's Son' offers a unique and intimate take on the inner life of Richard III. Delving deep into Richard's psyche, it reimagines his early years as he matures from a bereaved child of eight, to a courageous warrior of eighteen. At its heart lies a deep filial bond between Richard and his illustrious cousin, the Earl of Warwick, known to history as the Kingmaker. It is a bond forged in Richard's loss of his father, and Warwick's seeming inability to father a son of his own.

Richard's quest to find a father figure is a hitherto unexplored aspect of his young life, one which, I believe, adds yet another heartbreaking chapter to his story. Focussing on a series of strained family relationships, exacerbated by Warwick's treacherous defection, the novel explores Richard's tragic dilemma when he is forced to choose between Edward, his kingly brother, and Warwick, the man he has come to love as a second father.

The Traitor's Son has taken over ten years to fully research and write. At times the journey felt like a rollercoaster ride: a series of ups and downs, oscillating extremes of self-belief and despair when I found myself on the verge of giving up on the idea of ever becoming a published writer.

Although I worked alone and kept the novel close to my chest, what I really needed was a professional opinion on the quality, or otherwise, of my work. Could I write to a publishable standard, or was I simply wasting my time?

Seeking the advice of TLC seemed like a good place to start and I submitted my work for a Manuscript Assessment. When the report landed in my inbox, I opened the email with trepidation. I knew this would be an honest appraisal, and after working on my novel for such a long time, it felt like a make-or-break moment. But what I read filled me with a great deal of hope, as well as the confidence to continue.

I would like to thank TLC - and in particular my reader, Katherine Mezzacappa - who imbued me with the courage and determination to achieve my lifetime ambition.

Extract from *The Traitor's Son* by Wendy Johnson

The moon, heavy and brimming with light, casts a blueish hue over the fresh layer of snow. Hurriedly dressed for the journey, Richard huddles into his cloak. He's unused to being outside at dusk, and this part of the castle, bordered by kitchens and wash houses, is unfamiliar. It's where the servants live, where food is delivered and where it is cooked. Glancing at the towering walls, the upper casements shuttered against the world, he feels like an exile already.

A door opens at the end of the range, spilling a shaft of buttery light. A small figure emerges; a boy carrying a bucket, picking his way in the direction of the well. Richard wishes he could remain here, like him. Perhaps he and George could disguise themselves as potboys: the queen would never seek the sons of a duke amongst a gang of sweating scullions.

From the kitchen, a clang of dishes, the delicious smell of roasted salmon. Supper is being prepared, but tonight their mother and sister will be dining alone.

Amber had known he was leaving; her eyes, large and glistening, had pleaded with him to stay. He'd made the stable boy an offer; some comforts from his mother's dish, if he promised to care for the pony. But his mother wouldn't allow it. Bribery, she said, is a shameful thing which cannot honourably be practised. 'The stable boys are amply paid to tend the horses, Richard, and Amber is no different from the rest.'

But she is. Angry with the moisture that plays beneath his lids, he blinks, tilting his head towards the sky in hope of a diversion. The task proves fruitless, however: no stars tonight, the moon itself halfway to being hidden behind a bank of rolling cloud.

'You'd better not disgrace me on this voyage, Dickon, do you hear?' George says. 'No snivelling.'

Richard squares his shoulders. 'Of course not.'

But he cannot guarantee it. The furthest he has ever travelled is to the family castle at Ludlow, to Fotheringhay where he was born, to Berkhamstead and Baynard's; each governed and regulated by their father. He knows little of the world beyond, and nothing at all of the Low Countries. Glancing at George, he detects equal dread in his brother's trembling chin.

Catching his eye, George glowers. 'What?'

'I wish our cousin were coming with us.'

'Well, he's not. He's protecting London. Now, what did I just say?'

'That I'm not to disgrace you.'

'Yes. See you don't.'

Skelton bursts across the yard, rapping out instructions while his fellows unbar the gate that leads to the river stairs. Household pages emerge, slithering as they lug the boys' travelling chest over swiftly freezing ground. Small and battered, the chest contains everything the boys now own in the world: clean clothes, spare boots, their well-thumbed Psalters. It's as if their world has shrunk. As if it continues to shrink, moment upon moment.

'You understand why we must leave by the river stairs, my lords?' Skelton performs a swift bow. 'Better that few see us go.'

George concurs. Grabbing Richard's hand, he chafes it against the cold. 'Better we should escape, Dickon, than be captured by the queen.'

But it's not as simple as that. There are other concerns. 'What if the queen captures Mother and Margaret? You said yourself it would be worse than last time. And what if she slays our cousin, and places his head on a spike as she did Father's?'

George huffs and releases his hand. 'You Jonah. If you can't think of anything encouraging to say, don't bother.'

Richard hangs his head. His brother doesn't seem to understand how much he hates concealment. Whatever may lie ahead, whatever they may be forced to suffer, he would rather know of it. Their father's fate had been kept from him for the right reasons, but the pain of discovery has been too much. He can't allow anyone to hide the truth from him again. Not now. Not ever.

'George?'

'Shut up.'

'But—'

'Silence, you little worm.'

Torchlight billows from the corner turret, as their mother and sister arrive arm in arm; Margaret wiping her cheeks. Skelton swoops in before they arrive. Swift, pragmatic, and

keen to depart, he stations himself between the boys and their womenfolk.

‘All is ready, Madam. We must proceed.’

Framed by her widow’s kerchief, their mother’s face is tense, her manner unusually hesitant. If I beg her, Richard thinks, she may allow us to stay. If I say the right things, ask in the right way. But the words won’t come, and he knows the moment is passing. Has passed.

We’re going, he thinks, and there’s not a thing on God’s earth we can do about it.

‘Richard?’ The duchess sinks to her haunches; gown bunched and soaking up snow. Torchlight gilds her features; tracing contours, moulding hollows. ‘We have little time, but my commands are these. Look to George and obey Master Skelton in all things. Your father would expect nothing less.’

Richard nods. He’ll be watching, he knows he will. Perhaps from Purgatory, perhaps from the nearness of the shadows, his father will be observing them, and must not find him wanting. His heart leaps as a figure emerges from the gloom: but it’s only Skelton, eager than ever to be away.

‘Madam, I beg you, we must make haste.’

‘A moment, please. We must commend my sons to the care of God.’

Richard clasps his hands as his mother recites a Paternoster. Margaret joins in, stumbling over the first two lines then falling silent, as if she has forgotten what comes next, while he and George make no response at all. The murmured words seem frightening and final, setting them on a road whose end is both uncertain and unknowable. At the final *Amen*, a wet drop lands on Richard’s face, and he wonders whether it has begun to snow again.

Rising, the duchess flicks her cheek. ‘Put your lives in His hands and He will protect you. Have no doubt of that.’

Grasping Richard’s hood, she pulls it over his head, tucking it beneath his chin with her icy fingers, while Margaret enfolds George in a tight embrace.

‘Hurry, my lords. I must insist.’ Ushering them towards the river gate, Skelton permits but one backward glance.

A rowing boat waits at the landing, dipping and bobbing as they climb aboard. Richard sinks onto the roughhewn plank that passes for a seat and longs for the silken cushions

of their mother's barge.

Skelton, settling beside them, struggles to arrange his gangling legs in so cramped a space. 'All well, boy?'

'Well enough,' George says. 'I'm taking care of him.'

It's strange to be on the river after dark. And cold; waves slapping the gunwale, black and slick, like devils' tongues. At the prow, tallow flickers inside a battered lanthorn, a new cascade of tumbling snowflakes dancing in its glow.

Grim-visaged, the boatman wastes no time. Gripping the oars, he eases them from the jetty in a sickly, slopping rhythm.

'Be still, lads,' Skelton warns. 'No squirming about.'

George endorses the command with a sharp prod, while their guardian engages the boatman in muted conversation. Determined to calm himself, Richard stares at the inky water, but the retreating presence of Baynard's burns the back of his skull like a brand. To allow their home to disappear in such a way, unseen and unacknowledged, may be to lose it forever. He must take another look: to keep things right, to keep things safe.

Twisting his body, he peers towards the landing where a pair of castle guards flex their legs and breathe white plumes into the frosty air. Torchbearers are emerging through the open gate, and in their wake two black smudges which blend and part, before finally retreating inside. Mother and Margaret, he thinks, resolved upon a final glance. All at once he feels hollow, as if the very life has been sucked out of him. Too soon, the castle buildings are lost from view, and he settles with a sigh on the unforgiving plank.

'Sit still, Dickon. Has Master Skelton not instructed us?' George delivers another prod then turns away, blinking hard.

Perhaps, Richard thinks, I should consider this an adventure; something I will be able to boast about, in time. But he can't, he feels exposed on the water, unsafe, as if the whole world may know who they are, and where they're headed. Retreating into his hood, he marvels at the vastness of the sky. The heavens look so infinite, and the boat a tiny, helpless thing nodding worriedly on the swell. He shivers as snowflakes brush his upturned cheeks. If it's this cold on the river, how shall it be upon the German Ocean?

About the Writer

Wendy Johnson has a lifelong passion for medieval history, its people, and for bringing their incredible stories to life. Her short story, *Passion Play*, set in fourteenth century York, was shortlisted for the Woman and Home/Costa Coffee Short Story Competition in 2008.

She has been a member of the Richard III Society for almost forty years and in 2019 received the Society's Robert Hamblin Award. She is a founder member of Philippa Langley's *Looking for Richard Project* which successfully located the king's lost grave in 2012, and in 2014 Wendy co-authored *Finding Richard III: The Official Account of Research by the Retrieval and Reburial Project*.

'The Traitor's Son' – the first in a proposed Ricardian trilogy - is Wendy's debut novel and she is currently working on the sequel.

