

John Bale, William Shakespeare, and King John

By Mark Stevenson

For Les Fairfield

Christmastide, 1538-1539 must have been extraordinarily busy for the priest-playwright John Bale. Already deeply enmeshed in the intrigues and stratagems of the volatile religious and political atmosphere of the time, this Christmas season found Bale in the service of Thomas Cromwell, the “mother and midwife of the English Reformation” (House 123). As an active member of Cromwell’s stable of propagandists, Bale and his peripatetic troupe of actors might very well have found themselves performing a command holiday performance of Bale’s provocative play King John at Canterbury in the presence of Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer himself.¹ Bale’s play represents one of the high points in the astonishing rehabilitation of the reputation of King John, who at the time of the Canterbury performance had been dead for more than 300 years.

The emergence of King John Lackland (reigned 1199-1216) as Protestant hero and martyr might seem curious, even grotesque. He had, after all, capitulated to the intense pressure of Pope Innocent III in surrendering his nation to the power of the papacy. While John’s motives for this action were clearly mixed and some historians see the move as a brilliant tactical maneuver, the fact remains that England had become a papal fiefdom and was subsequently plunged into civil war. As a result, John’s reputation had suffered for more than three centuries.

While the reformation of John’s reputation was gradual and not simply a product of Cromwell’s Protestant propaganda campaign or Bale’s skills as a polemical

playwright, it does reflect a fundamental refocusing and reinterpretation of English history from the new perspective occasioned by Henry VIII's break with Rome and the parallel emergence of a uniquely Protestant view of God, King, and Country. It is in this context, that King John begins to emerge as a proto-Protestant, fighting the usurpation of his God-given authority by the pope centuries before such a battle could reasonably be expected to succeed. "The attraction of [John] as a hero was chiefly his opposition to the papacy which brought excommunication upon him This theme of the supremacy of the King against the papacy was fundamental to the political struggles of the late 1530s" (Happe 93).

Bale's play, King John, represents an apotheosis of the reclamation of the memory of John, the king's historical resurrection begun in the 1520s by a variety of able Protestant sympathizers, including William Tyndale. This refashioning of John anticipated the great political and religious conflicts of the Tudor age. The late and newly-lamented King John became a model for the cause of reform, and so the past was used to anticipate the future through the establishment of an important historical precedent for what would eventually become Henry VIII's break with Rome.

Bale's life is a paradigm of the English reformation. "Bale's role in the English Reformation was to be a mythmaker ... for his disoriented age, craftsman of a past which could give English a *point d'appui* in a threatening world" (Fairfield 119). His life spans the Tudor age. Born in 1495 during the reign of the first Tudor, Henry VII, Bale lived to see the accession of the last of the Tudors, Elizabeth I, before his death in 1563. The devout Carmelite who in 1526 authored an antiphon to the Blessed Virgin which began, "Hail flowering blossom of Carmel, the Father's pious daughter, Mother of Emmanuel,

happy above thousands; O Virgin, give aid, as You are wont, to your brothers ...,"was in less than a decade to become "bilious" Bale the rabid Protestant polemicist (178). His conversion to Protestantism had been complete and passionate.

In his biography of Thomas Cranmer, Diarmaid MacCulloch notes that the 1520s found Cranmer continuing in the Roman Catholic tradition, along with another future Protestant. "One might note that the same is true of another of Cranmer's contemporaries, the Carmelite friar John Bale: Bale was a fierce champion of orthodoxy and a despiser of Lutheranism until the early 1530s" (27). But the year 1533 was clearly momentous for both Bale and Cranmer. It was the year of Cranmer's surprising selection as Archbishop of Canterbury and also Bale's appointment as prior of the Carmelite Friary in Ipswich. For Bale, a transformation leading to a profound conversion was already underway. "The real break with his past, the conscious conversion to Protestant theology, probably came in 1533 while he was prior of the White Friars at Ipswich" (Fairfield 33).²

The passion of his conversion was clearly intense. Very soon afterward he was called in for disciplinary questioning by the Archbishop of York, attacked for preaching against Aquinas and church ceremony, and imprisoned in Greenwich. As a result he attracted the attention of a powerful patron, Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII's chief minister from 1532-1540. It was Cromwell who not only secured Bale's release from prison, but employed him as a foot soldier in his on-going propaganda war to win the hearts and minds of the people for Protestant reform. Bale later wrote that Cromwell rescued him "on account of [my] comedies" (Harris 100). So at some point the former Carmelite historian had turned his considerable skills as a chronicler and his new found Protestant passion to playwriting and as a result Bale was recruited not only to write

plays, but apparently also to produce, direct, and possibly act in them as well through the formation of an itinerant acting troupe. It appears as if sometime in the acting company's 1538 "season," its resident playwright began rehearsals for a piece dealing with a former English monarch who, like Henry VIII, had encountered difficulties with the Church of Rome. The play was Bale's King John.

Much has been written about the date of the play's composition, the nature and circumstances of its several revisions, the A-text and B-text additions, its sources, and indeed about Bale's career as a playwright as a whole.³ The work is a notable theatre artifact in that it serves as a bridge in English theatre history between the great morality plays of the Middle Ages and the great English histories, subsequently perfected by William Shakespeare. A brief summary of Bale's King John reveals effective use of the old morality plays' personification of vices and virtues. The king is portrayed as the proto-Protestant hero, protector of the Widow England, torn from her husband, God, through false religion. The besieged King attempts to retain the loyalty of Nobility and Civil Order, only to be thwarted by Sedition, Dissimulation, Private Wealth, and Usurped Power. "...With the aid of Clergy, John is subdued, and England has to wait 300 years for a 'Duke Josue' to lead her to the land of milk and honey" (Wilson and Hunter 37).

The final complete version of the play reveals the ways that Bale also contributes to the genre of the history play with its 2-act structure, and particularly through the doubling and trebling of the roles to include historical figures such as Stephen Langton, Pandulphus, and John's alleged assassin Simon of Swinsett. Imperial Majesty also makes an appearance as a kind of *deus ex machina*, who could be interpreted as Henry VIII,

Edward VI, or Elizabeth I, depending on the dates of the play's various revisions. It is in all respects a fascinating work.

Bale also deftly adapted the tradition of chronicle-writing to the Protestant position by first wrenching it away from the Roman bias of Catholic annalists and then using it against his former Mother Church to great effect. History must be re-written, for it had been distorted by the corrupt and decaying Church, portrayed throughout the play as "bloody Babylon," under the insidious leadership of the pope, "the wild boar of Rome," the anti-Christ. Bale uses the characters Widow England and Verity to set the historical record straight regarding the true nature of King John.

ENGLAND. Report what they will, in their most furious madness,

Of this noble king much was the godliness.

VERITY. I assure ye, friends, let men write what they will,

King John was a man both valiant and godly (72)⁴

The exchange continues a few lines later with Nobility and Clergy now included.

NOBILITY. Sir, [King John] was a man of a very wicked sort.

VERITY. Ye are much to blame your prince so to report.

How can ye presume to be called Nobility

Defaming a prince in your malignity?

Ecclesiastes saith: If thou with an hateful heart

Misnamest a king, thou playest such a wicked part

CLERGY. He speaketh not against the crown, but the man, perdee!

VERITY. Oh! Where is the spirit which ought to reign in thee?

The crown of itself, without the man, is nothing.

Learn of the Scriptures to have better understanding.

The heart of a king is in the hands of the Lord... (72-73).

Bale repeatedly articulates the perspective that the divinely-appointed monarch must take upon himself direct responsibility for the religious welfare of his people. This emphasis is particularly intriguing in light of the possibility that Henry VIII's conservative countermovement to slow the speed of Cromwell's reforms might have already begun during the play's early "run." The King's desire for his Church to remain both independent from Rome and Catholic in spirit coalesced during the late 1530s. King John may have been performed in September, 1538 and again in January, 1539, which may have been the performance before Cranmer at Canterbury. Only four months after the latter performance, the Six Articles appeared in Parliament, for all intents and purposes bringing the Protestant advances to a halt. The impact of this sea change was to have a profound impact on both Bale and his patron. Thomas Cromwell was executed in 1540 and that same year Bale was forced into the first of his two exiles. The Protestant cause stalled, Bale had seven years in Germany to re-evaluate the message of King John.

In this context, it is interesting to look at a monologue delivered by The Interpreter marking what came to be the act division of the play. Clearly written after the death of Henry VIII in 1547, Bale looks back at Henry's legacy, perhaps a bit wistfully and with more than a little nostalgia for what might have been.

This noble King John, as a faithful Moses,
Withstood proud Pharaoh for his poor Israel;
Minding to bring it out of the land of darkness.

But the Egyptians did against him so rebel
That his poor people still did in the desert dwell,
Till that Duke Josue, which was our late King Henry,
Clearly brought us unto the land of milk and honey (38).

Bale's re-writing of English history is profoundly myopic. The prickly issue of John's possible involvement in the murder of his nephew, Arthur, and the complex arguments revolving around the right of succession which plagued the early years of John's reign are never raised. Likewise the true nature of John's feud with the pope over the appointment of the able Stephen Langton as Archbishop of Canterbury is given short shrift, with the character of Sedition doubling as the sinister would-be-archbishop. Bale's lurid depiction of the circumstances surrounding the alleged assassination of John with the encouragement of Rome is spurious at best and there is no mention whatsoever of Magna Carta, reflecting a general lack of interest in the document by the more imperial Tudors.

Bale's vision of history saw in John's resistance to the power of Rome a model to be emulated by his eventual successor Henry VIII. John began and Henry continued up to a point a new vision of the true and pure church liberated from the wiles of Rome. "The conclusion was clear: if anyone sought out the true church, he could find it in England. It was the Romans who had apostatized from the church of Christ, not the English" (Levy 102). Bale was convinced of England's central role in the Christian Story, but his dreams were deferred until the accession of the fifth and last Tudor monarch in November, 1558, Elizabeth I.

Bale's second exile to escape the flames of the reign of Mary Tudor ended in 1559. His exile only strengthened his sense of history and of England's central place in it as revealed in his final revisions to King John. The concluding 2-dozen lines are probably intended as a final paean to a youthful monarch from an aged reformer.

NOBILITY. England hath a Queen, thanks to the Lord above!

Which may be a light to other princes all,
For the godly ways whom she doth daily move
To her liege people, through God's special.
She is that angel, as Saint John doth him call,
That with the Lord's seal doth mark out His true servants,
Printing in their hearts His holy words and covenants.

CLERGY. In Daniel's spirit she hath subdued the papists,

With all the offspring of Antichrist's generation;
And now, of late days, the sect of Anabaptists
She seeketh to suppress for their pestiferous fashion.
She vanquisheth also the great abomination
Of superstitions, witchcrafts, and idolatry,
Restoring God's honour to His first force and beauty.

CIVIL ORDER. Pray unto the Lord that her grace may continue

The days of Nestor, to our soul's consolation;
And that her offspring may live also to subdue
The great Antichrist, with his whole generation,
In Helias' spirit to the comfort of this nation:

Also to preserve her most honourable Council,
To the praise of God and glory of the Gospel!

Thus Endeth The Two Plays of King John (87)

Bale's optimism may have become somewhat tempered by the time of his death in 1563. The pragmatic realities of the Elizabethan Settlement and the Queen's emphasis on the political rather than the theological or doctrinal might be seen to have blunted the impact of first-generation reformers like Bale. "...To some extent [the Elizabethan Settlement] represented the nation's instinct for material self-preservation, yet it was not wholly a negative reaction against the perils of religious fanaticism. Something more creative than mere disillusion or self-interest was also coming to birth in English society" (Dickens 388).

Perhaps no individual represents this nascent creativity more fully than William Shakespeare. Born only six years into Elizabeth's reign, and five months after the death of John Bale, the emerging worldview into which he was born ultimately helped to shape, and was subsequently to chronicle, served as "the nursery of Shakespeare's political values" (Beaurline 17). While his name has become synonymous with the glories of the Elizabethan Age, he actually began his miraculous career as a playwright in the late 1580s or early 1590s, when the reign of Elizabeth, now increasingly referred to as the Old Queen, was clearly entering its twilight years. He was an astute observer of contemporary politics and would obviously have been keenly aware of the tumultuous events of the years which immediately preceded the production of his first plays, events both foreign and domestic which continually threatened the cherished equilibrium of the Elizabethan Settlement.

On one level it might appear surprising that Shakespeare undertook a play based on the closing period in the reign of the early 13th century King John. Of his ten history plays, only King John and Henry VIII remain outside his vast national history chronicling the events leading up to and encompassing the Wars of the Roses. The cycle contains 2 tetralogies: Richard II, Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2, and Henry V, and Henry VI, Parts 1, 2, and 3 and Richard III. In fact, it is only the absence of a play on Henry VII that interrupts what would have been an unbroken line to Henry VIII. On the other hand, the astute playwright-producer-actor would surely have seen the commercial possibilities in dramatizing the life and death of a monarch as resilient as John, whose reign continued to resonate into the final decade of the Tudor Age.

It would be intriguing to point to a strong, direct link between John Bale's King John and William Shakespeare's Life and Death of King John. But such a link seems highly unlikely, as Bale's play did not appear in printed form until 1838 and there is no evidence that Shakespeare had access to the play in other forms. Certainly Bale's treatment of John would have contributed to a general knowledge of John's reign and to its Tudor spin, with which Shakespeare would have been familiar as he approached his own treatment of the material. Shakespeare most probably saw the commercial possibilities of this project through an earlier play, The Troublesome Reign of John, King of England, abbreviated as T.R., published anonymously in 1591, a play not dissimilar to John Bale's treatment of the subject in its strongly patriotic, anti-Catholic, pro-John tone.

A majority of scholars, with some notable exceptions, believe that Shakespeare used T.R. as a source for his own treatment of the story of King John.⁵ But as King John did not appear in print until the First Folio (1623), as there is no record of any pre-

Restoration performance of the play, its dating has been the subject of much speculation. Because of his apparent use of source information found in the revised Holinshed Chronicles, it is widely held that Shakespeare's King John post-dates the second and enlarged edition of Holinshed published in 1587. Studies of Shakespeare's use of vocabulary, meter, and topical allusions place the composition of King John sometime c. 1595.

Shakespeare would clearly have been aware of some subtle shifts in the prevailing historical perspective on John that occurred during Elizabeth's reign, shifts reflected in the new and enlarged Holinshed, where issues of succession, submission, and rebellion enter the public discourse in a new way. "...Raphael Holinshed sees the reign [of John] as a demonstration of the 'fruits of variance' and 'the gain that riseth of dissension.' 'No greater nor safer fortification can betide a land,' he adds, 'than when the inhabitants are all alike minded'" (Smallwood 11). These sentiments were strongly echoed in a widely published and even more widely heard sermon entitled, "Homily against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion," of which Shakespeare would also most certainly have been aware.

Clearly there was growing ambivalence about the reign of King John. Emphasis on the religious aspects of John's difficulties which had proved so useful to Protestant propagandists in the 1530s began to merge with interest in the political complexities surrounding John's claim to the throne after the death of his brother, Richard I. Clearly this issue was one of profound import to Elizabethans increasingly uneasy over their own monarch's unwillingness to name a successor as she entered what were to be the final years of her long reign. As with Bale's King John and the anonymous author of T.R.,

Shakespeare was to turn to a history play to use the past to mirror his own age's uncertain present.

In this context, Shakespeare's play can be seen as an allegory of the 1590s, just as Bale's reflected the later 1530s. Shakespeare highlights the issue of succession and the conflict revolving around the legitimate revivals to the throne in the conflicting claims of John and his young nephew, Arthur, son of his late brother, whose rival claim is at first championed and then abandoned by King Philip of France. Further complicating the legitimacy question, Shakespeare includes the intriguing character, Philip the Bastard, illegitimate son of Richard I. The Bastard as he is called seems to counter John's own claim to monarchical legitimacy, particularly as by play's end, he stands alone as an example of honor.

Allegorically, then, the imprisoned Arthur, who dies as a direct result of John's wishes, might be seen to represent the doomed Mary Queen of Scots, the imprisoned rival for Elizabeth's throne. Shakespeare's rebellious barons who initially support the invasion of England by the Catholic Dauphin, only to recant and re-pledge their allegiance to the crown, might be seen as the restless Elizabeth Catholic nobility; while the pope's legate through his excommunication of John might mirror the 1570 excommunication of Elizabeth.

But Shakespeare's multi-dimensional tapestry is considerably more complex than allegory alone, reflecting the evolution of the history play from the contributions of playwrights like John Bale to what was emerging as Shakespeare's more holistic approach to characterization, with its more realistic linkage to historical context. In Shakespeare we see, for the most part, a "real" 3-dimensional king, rather than an "ideal"

2-dimensional caricature. In the gifted hands of Shakespeare both character and context take on a finely nuanced universality. “Shakespeare sees John as a fallible, uncertain, imperfect monarch, successful at first ... but increasingly subject to the corrupting power of political need, so that his final collapse is total” (Smallwood 12). Bale effectively modified the use of characters as personifications of vice and virtues so central to medieval drama, while Shakespeare subtly crafted a new and nuanced personae of his age, *realpolitik*.

Elizabeth ultimately ascended the throne through her father’s “last will in writing,” a legality which nonetheless failed to quell a groundswell of controversy, claims, and counter claims. John had likewise come to the throne through the last will of his brother, Richard I. But Richard’s will had superseded an earlier verbal designation of Arthur as heir, who as the son of John’s late older brother Geoffrey, had an extremely strong and legitimate claim to the throne. In this context, John might very well be seen as a usurper. So the stage was set for the fierce controversy which, as was the case with Elizabeth, plagued the early years of John’s reign. The dilemma throughout Shakespeare’s play is the presence of what appears to be a *de facto* king in John and a *de jure* king in young Arthur. This central problem is presented in the opening lines of Shakespeare’s play when Chatillon, King Philip’s petulant messenger, confronts a defiant John:

Thus, after greeting, speaks the King of France

In my behaviour to the majesty,

The borrowed majesty of England here. (1.1.2-4)⁶

Later in the first scene, John’s mother, the indomitable Eleanor of Aquitaine, casts

further doubt upon her son's claim in what is clearly Shakespeare's deliberate addition to the source material. While Holinshed clearly saw John as the rightful heir nominated by Richard I, albeit through a deathbed will, Shakespeare portrays John as a usurper.

KING JOHN. Our strong possession and our right for us.

ELEANOR. Your strong possession much more than your right,

Or else it must go wrong with you and me;

So much my conscience whispers in your ear,

Which none but heaven and you shall hear. (1.1.39-42)

Shakespeare portrays John's conflict with Rome not so much as a moral or doctrinal dilemma, as it appeared to Bale, but rather as almost exclusively a political one, yet another manifestation of the pervasive pursuit of power which seems to characterize this world of, "... Commodity, the vile-drawing bias of the world, a form of self-interest, is the main purpose of their statecraft, whereby a prince's or pope's personal interest is thought to be coextensive with national and church interest" (Beaurline 37). The "religious issue" is not even introduced until Act 3, scene 1, line 135 with the entrance of Cardinal Pandulph, the pope's representative, who promptly excommunicates John for his refusal to acknowledge Stephen Langton as archbishop, and who also pressures the French King Philip to reject a peace with John made only moments before.

This is not to say that Shakespeare was ignoring England's serious, ongoing and difficulties with Rome and her allies. He portrays Pandulph as a cunning and unscrupulous diplomat and John's strong response to the papal legate rings with English defiance.

What earthly name to interrogatories

Can task the free breath of a sacred king?
Thou canst not, cardinal, devise a name
So slight, unworthy, and ridiculous
To charge me to an answer, as the Pope. (3.1.147-150)

Despite his defiance, John is the ultimate representative of corrosive self-interest. In response to the pope's excommunication, he stages a ludicrous second coronation to force his restless barons to restate their faltering allegiance. The ploy is a complete failure from the king's point of view, but serves as a means to frame Shakespeare's concern with rebellion.

Ultimately, the barons rebel against John not because he is a usurper to the throne, not even because he is by this point in the play perceived as an increasingly ineffectual petty tyrant, but because he is seen as being directly responsible for the death of young Arthur, the legitimate heir. Arthur's death from injuries sustained while trying to escape an imprisonment and an execution ordered by John seals the fate of the doomed king. The course is set in a remarkably taut scene between John and his hired assassin, Hubert.

KING JOHN. Death.

HUBERT. My Lord.

KING JOHN. A grave.

HUBERT. He shall not live.

KING JOHN. Enough. (3.3.65-69)

Here commodity moves into the realm of murder and when the plot is discovered by the barons, they abandon their *de facto* king. At first glance, Shakespeare may be seen to be somewhat ambivalent in his treatment of the rebellious barons. Their outrage at the

discovery of Arthur's body is genuine, as is their remorse at joining forces with the French invasion of England, an act of treason which brings Salisbury literally to tears. But these are tears not only of grief, but more importantly of self-justification.

But such is the infection of the time

That for the health and physic of our right,

We cannot deal but with the very hand

Of stern injustice and confused wrong (5.2.2024)

King John's fall in Shakespeare's play is complete and necessary. As did Bale, Shakespeare chose fictitious death by poison for the monarch, although its administration by a monk is given merely a fleeting reference at the end of the play and is nearly lost in John's protracted, yet strangely moving death scene. In contrast to Bale, the means of John's death is considerably less important to Shakespeare than the death itself. For Shakespeare, restoration of civil and monarchical order after the king's death is the crucial point and it is significant that he chooses the character of Philip the Bastard as the final spokesman for that order in the final lines.

This England never did, nor never shall,

Lie at the proud foot of a conqueror,

But when it first did help to wound itself.

Now these her princes are come home again,

Come the three corners of the world in arms,

And we shall shock them. Nought shall make us rue,

If England to itself do rest but true. (5.7.112-118)

Shakespeare's deliberate use of the qualifying "if" in the last line made this last speech not merely a patriotic call to arms, but rather a history lesson of vital importance. The crown must pass to an unquestionably legitimate heir, Henry III, untainted by the sins of his father. The play ends with the stability of the monarchy and therefore the nation restored. King John has once again been called from a troubled past to illuminate an uncertain present.

Notes

¹ A number of scholars agree that the performance was most likely of Bale's King John, including House and Carole Levin in her book, Propaganda in the English Reformation, Studies in British History, Vol. 11.

² Fairfield's book, John Bale: Mythmaker for the English Reformation, provides a most useful summary of the circumstances which contributed to Bale's conversion to Protestant theology.

³ See particularly John Bale's King Johan, edited and with an introduction by Barry B. Adams; The Complete Plays of John Bale, Volume 1, edited and with an introduction by Peter Happe; and Five Plays About King John by May Mattsson.

⁴ All quotations from Bale's play are taken from "King John," Elizabethan History Plays, edited by William A. Armstrong.

⁵ See L.A. Beaurline's introduction to the New Cambridge Shakespeare's King John for the argument that Shakespeare's play preceded T.R.

⁶ All quotes from Shakespeare's play are taken from the New Cambridge Shakespeare, King John edited by L.A. Beaurline.

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