

## Religion in *King John*: Shakespeare's View

ROY BATTENHOUSE

One way of grasping the distinctive quality of Shakespeare's vision is to compare his work with another author's on the same topic. *The Troublesome Raigne of King John* (1591) is either the immediate source of Shakespeare's play (as most critics think) or else a rival author's response to an early John play by Shakespeare (as supposed by Honigsmann and Matchett). In any case the two texts have a similar outline yet are substantially different. Shakespeare, for instance, has no parallel to the *Troublesome Raigne's* depicting a visit to a monastery where lecherous friars hide nuns in their chests, nor to another scene which devotes a hundred lines to a friar's conspiring with his Abbot to poison King John and being absolved in advance. Shakespeare has avoided anti-monastic propaganda. But does this mean he has no interest in religious issues? On the contrary, the central event in his play (as likewise in the *Troublesome Raigne*) is a confrontation between John and the papal legate Pandulph, an event which Protestant historians considered to be analogous to Henry VIII's break with the church of Rome.

Shakespeare's treatment of the quarrel, however, is evenhanded. Neither John nor Pandulph is depicted as a villain. But each is shown to be a counterfeiter of religious duty. A recent critic has alleged that Shakespeare "minimizes" the religious issue by not adhering to "the Protestant view of things" which unifies the *Troublesome Raigne*.<sup>1</sup> But I would say, rather, that Shakespeare makes the religious issue all important, by showing us how a corrupting by "commodity" underlies the troubles of King John and his times—and by implication those of the 16th century also. Shakespeare's play exemplifies the universal truth of a maxim in the Bible, that "cupidity" is the root of all evil. Also indicated are the providential means by which cupidity can be defeated.

---

For debates inspired by this article, please check the Connotations website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debate/religion-in-king-john/>>.

## I

Whereas the *Troublesome Raigne* regards John as a champion of "Christ's true faith" up until his great sin of attempting the murder of young Arthur, Shakespeare's play rests on other premises. It satirizes the peace won by John from Philip of France in Act II, allowing Falconbridge to term it a "mad" composition by mad kings who have yielded to "commodity, the bias of the world" (2.1.574). And in Shakespeare's version John has been the tempter of Philip, offering him a large bribe to agree to this peace, because John knows, as his mother reminds him, that his own right to the English crown is questionable and needs France's support. John is shoring up a "borrow'd Majesty" (1.1.4).

It is against this background that Pandulph arrives to "religiously demand" of John why he is keeping Langton from his see (3.1.140). The legate's tone is courteous, beginning with the words, "Hail, you anointed deputies of heaven" (3.1.136), and thus is unlike that of the bullying Pandulph of *The Troublesome Raigne*, whose first words are a command to Philip to "joyne not hands / With him that stands accurst of God and man." In the *Troublesome Raigne* it is John who speaks politely, by replying that "as I honor the Church and holy Churchmen, so I scorn to be subject to the greatest Prelate in the world." He will be "next under God, supreme head both over spiritual and temporal." The reply of Shakespeare's John is noticeably more boastful and scoffing:

What earthy name to interrogatories  
 Can taste 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.  
 Tell him this tale; and from the mouth of England  
 Add thus much more, that no Italian priest  
 Shall tithe or toll in our dominions;  
 But as we, under God, are supreme head,  
 So under Him that great supremacy,  
 Where we do reign, we will alone uphold  
 Without th' assistance of a mortal hand:  
 So tell the pope, all reverence set apart  
 To him and his usurp'd authority. (3.1.147-60)

While Protestant auditors at the Globe probably delighted to hear the Pope labelled a usurper, the charge is being made here by a speaker whose own title is questionable.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, his boast of needing no "assistance of a mortal hand" to uphold his rule is highly ironic if one recalls how he has bought the assistance of King Philip's mortal hand. And when in his next speech he proceeds to express contempt for kings who allow themselves to "purchase corrupted pardon" with vile gold, may not an auditor remember John's use of money and English provinces to purchase from Philip an overlooking of John's infringing of Arthur's rights? Just how "sacred" a king is John? Increasingly he will be driven to call on the mortal hand of others to aid him—first, the hand of Hubert, when he secretly authorizes him to murder Arthur, and later Pandulph's political hand, when he begs to be rescued by him from the disasters brought on by John's own policies.

John in Shakespeare's play is capable of enough conscience to recognize murder as a sin, yet he winks at this sin when greedy for his own safety. He repents when he feels the pinch of worldly loss, and even then he is more ready to blame Hubert than to amend his own behavior. When told that Arthur is alive, he values this news for its political usefulness rather than because of any love for Arthur. And he soon reverts, only fifty lines later, to ordering the murder of another innocent, a prophet named Peter who predicts John will forfeit his crown. Blind rage is this John's typical response to any threat to himself. He has no genuine religion to uphold him in times of trouble. He relies on political maneuver, and when this fails he is ineffective. In the battle against his barons he leaves the field heart-sick, wearied by a "tyrant fever" which he says is burning him up. By this image Shakespeare is suggesting a fate in accord with Philip of France's prediction in 3.1.344-45: "Thy rage shall burn thee up, and thou shalt turn / To ashes . . ."

Holinshed had ascribed John's death to a fever brought on by grief over army losses, an emphasis retained by Shakespeare. Holinshed had also mentioned, however, that some writers tell of John's being given poisoned ale by a monk of Swensted Abbey. This story the historian John Foxe amplified into Protestant polemic accompanied by a woodcut picturing six stages of monastic perfidy. But Shakespeare

reduced the poisoning to merely a rumor which Hubert reports to Falconbridge, telling him "The King, I fear, is poison'd by a monk" (5.6.23). Hubert says it was "a resolved villain" (5.6.29) whose bowels suddenly burst out. From this report, one might expect to see a John who likewise dies from burst bowels. But Shakespeare shows us only a John who speaks of a fire in his bosom that is crumbling his bowels, and he makes no mention of a monk's causing this—nor does anyone else on stage.

But whether or not an outsider's poison exacerbated the fever of Shakespeare's John, a sense of fated punishment is suggested when the dying John speaks of being reduced to a module of "confounded royalty" (5.7.58). He dies recognizing his life's failure, and without any rites from a clergyman. This lack of any deathbed piety contrasts with the amendment of life shown earlier by the dying Lord Melun, a Frenchman whose grandfather was an Englishman. And it contrasts also with the kind of death depicted for John in *The Troublesome Raigne*. There John speaks of a catalog of his sins, which he fears are too great to be forgiven, until his companion Falconbridge counsels him to call on Christ. Whereupon John likens himself to the biblical David whose heart "with murder was attaint," then proceeds to prophesy a kingly successor who will build the Lord a house by treading down the Pope, and ends by declaring: "In the faith of *Jesu* John doth die." The faith of Jesus, let us note, is here being identified with a 16th century Protestant faith ascribed implausibly to the historical John. The *Troublesome Raigne's* John is given a faith similar to today's "liberation" theology. But Shakespeare will have none of this. He presents us instead a commodity-minded John whose life, like a ship on fire, is ending with a burning of "the tackle of my heart" (5.7.52).

## II

Cardinal Pandulph, the canon lawyer who seeks to discipline John, is presented by Shakespeare as similarly bereft of any true religion. His urbane professionalism makes him like the lawyers in the Bible who opposed Jesus with a version of the law's letter lacking any of

the love central to God's law. This aspect in Pandulph is made evident by Shakespeare in many ways. One is by the prominence given to Constance, who is shown begging for help from the Cardinal and receiving none. Pandulph's focus is on the canonical prerogatives of his office, rather than on the church's mission to cure souls. True, he does not offer (as does the villainous Pandulph of *The Troublesome Raigne*) "pardon and forgiveness of sinne" to anyone who will "murder" John; he promises, rather, the merit of sainthood to whoever "takes away by any secret course / Thy hateful life" (3.1.178). He thereby allows the possibility that "secret course" may mean some work of grace which removes John's hatefulness; yet the ambiguous phrase insinuates an undercover assassination, a deed Pandulph cannot bring himself to name. Moreover, he intends an enforcing of the church's law by force of arms, and when asking Philip of France to take up arms he is equating this mission with being "champion of our church" (3.1.267). Championing the church comes to mean, thus, not a fulfilling of the law of charity, but rather a supporting of "a mother's curse, on her revolting son" (3.1.257). This phrasing should remind us of Lady Falconbridge, the adulterous mother of the play's initial Act who came on stage to denounce her son for questioning her honor. Pandulph is implicitly a spokesman more concerned to maintain face for "mother church" (whose politics are adulterous) than to fulfil the duty of Christ's faithful servant. Erasmus, we may recall, had satirized a 16th-century pope (Julius) for conducting worldly wars in the name of holiness. In Pandulph the dramatist Shakespeare is showing how religion gets distorted.

A well-known passage in the Epistle of James sums up true religion as a visiting of the fatherless and widows in their affliction and keeping oneself unspotted from the world (James 1:27). Pandulph is shown by Shakespeare to be not only spotted by worldliness but also unconcerned for the welfare of Constance and Arthur, the widow and the orphan of the play.<sup>3</sup> Constance is an ambitious mother driven to despair, who asks Pandulph to "Preach some philosophy to make me mad" (3.3.51). He is incapable of any healing word for her plight. Likewise, when France asks Pandulph to devise "out of your grace" some gentle order whereby France and England "shall be blest" (3.1.250-51), he can answer only with a call to war. The Bastard

Falconbridge aptly characterizes this policy as prompted by "Old time the clock-setter" (3.1.324)—i.e., by the *zeitgeist* rather than the spirit of grace. Then when the battle ends with France's defeat, the comfort offered him by the Cardinal is of a Machiavellian kind. He prophesies that John's cupidity will cause him to murder Arthur, which will cause a disaffection by John's subjects, and thus provide France a wonderful opportunity to profit for himself (i.e. indulge *his* cupidity) by invading England to claim its crown. Pandulph the preacher of power politics is Shakespeare's portrait of a commodity-minded perversion of churchly Holiness.

To spice the portrait Shakespeare has Pandulph give Philip of France an elaborately scholastic justification for breaking his oath with John. The logic of it is beautifully sophistic.<sup>4</sup> It begins with the premise that "It is religion that doth make vows kept" (3.1.279). But no mention is made of Philip's baptismal vow to serve Christ when Pandulph names as Philip's "first vow" to heaven a championing of the church represented by Pandulph. Philip's peace treaty with John, it is then asserted, goes contrary to his first vow and thus is sworn "amiss," requiring the following correction:

The better act of purposes mistook  
Is to mistake again; . . .

[Thus] falsehood falsehood cures, as fire cools fire. (3.1.274-77)

Do two wrongs make a right, and is cure achieved by a doubling of falsehood? The argument has been presented with such a bewildering speed that poor Philip is overwhelmed by it. His hesitation collapses when Pandulph tells him that, if he doesn't yield, "the peril of our curses light on thee" (3.1.295).

The polished Pandulph may be said to be morally akin to the proud Constance who expected kings to "bow to" her will (3.1.74). In Act 5 he will tell King John that since it was "my breath that blew this tempest up," a bowing John will find that "my tongue shall hush again this storm of war" (5.1.17-20). But here it is he who is mistaken, as we see when Lewis the Dauphin refuses to give up the selfish purpose which Pandulph had earlier implanted in him. The providential consequences of tempest in the form of flood and shipwreck are shown by Shakespeare to be the effective cooler of the

fire of the contending parties. The Lincoln washes and the Goodwin sands cool the fire of proud men. Pandulph at the end is not the causer of peace but only a useful messenger between the two camps when their selfish ambition has turned to ashes.

### III

The innocent boy Arthur is the play's representative of genuine religious piety. He regards himself as Richard's "offspring," but is never provocative toward King John. He begs his mother to be content with the peace made between John and Philip of France. When imprisoned he declares that "by my Christendom" he would be happy to be a keeper of sheep. He changes Hubert's intention to blind him simply by awakening Hubert's love. This response contrasts with that in the *Troublesome Raigne*. The Arthur of that play responds by immediately denouncing Hubert's warrant as hellish and damnable, and then by arguing that God's command against murder must take priority over a king's command. But this kind of legalistic moralizing is rejected by Shakespeare. Instead, he has Arthur, on being shown the King's warrant, respond with a gentle question, "Must you with hot irons burn out both mine eyes?" (4.1.39) and then with the further question, "Have you the heart?" (4.1.41) as he goes on to prattle about how when Hubert had a headache he comforted him with loving words. Yet now

If heaven be pleas'd that you must use me ill,  
Why then you must. Will you put out mine eyes?  
These eyes that never did nor never shall  
So much as frown on you. (4.1.55-58)

This attitude of non-resistance to evil except through a kindly questioning seems to me to be modeled on the character of the boy Isaac in mystery-play drama.

Particularly notable is Arthur's response when Hubert begins to bind him and takes in hand the iron. Pleading as to a father figure, Arthur cries "O, save me, Hubert" (4.1.72) and at same time he vows to "not struggle" but "sit as quiet as a lamb" without wincing (4.1.76-79). This

is like the attitude of the biblical boy Isaac and also it resembles the loving obedience of Jesus when praying at Gethsemane. It overcomes Hubert's self-serving wish to please John. The hot iron cools in Hubert's hand as his resolution wavers during thirty lines of dialogue which ends with the boy's saying,

There is no malice in this burning coal;  
The breath of heaven has blown his spirit out  
And strew'd repentant ashes on his head. (4.1.108-10)<sup>5</sup>

The "breath of heaven" has been mediated by Arthur to what he describes as "this iron age" (4.1.60).

The converted Hubert becomes in Shakespeare's play a legatee of Arthur's spirit who influences indirectly some repentances by others. When the French Lord Melun repents on his deathbed a treachery he has sworn to, he tells us that his conscience has been awakened by his love for Hubert. Also we see Hubert make a night visit to the camp of the Bastard Falconbridge to bring him news that saves him from attempting to make himself king. At this moment the Bastard has been acting as John's appointed leader of his forces, and he knows the King is very sick. On recognizing Hubert by his voice coming from the darkness, the Bastard answers his "Who art thou?" by replying:

Thou mayst befriend me so much as to think  
I come one way of the Plantagenets. (5.6.10-11)

This implies a bid to be recognized as King Richard's heir. But Hubert replies by addressing him only as "brave soldier" (5.6.13) and saying he has "comfortless" (5.6.20) news to bring: the King has been poisoned. "Who didst thou leave to tend his Majesty?" the Bastard asks (5.6.32). He is then told news that surprises him: "all about his Majesty" (5.6.36) are the returned lords who have brought Prince Henry with them to secure their pardon. The Bastard's response is to invoke "mighty heaven" to "tempt us not to bear above our power" (5.6.37-38). His loss of troops in the Lincoln washes he now regards as an omen from heaven. He must beware of overreaching. Hubert's "news" has helped him beware.

Hurrying to the King's bedside he confesses that only heaven knows how the Dauphin's army can be answered. When John gives no response but dies, the Bastard is quick to declare his dedication to John:

To do the office for thee of revenge,  
And then my soul shall wait on thee to heaven,  
As it on earth hath been thy servant still. (5.7.71-73)

But now he finds no one else interested in revenge. When he calls on the lords to follow him against the Dauphin, he is told that an honorable peace has already been arranged, in which he may *join with them*. Thus, politely, he is put in his place as a subordinate in the new regime and given his cue to join in homage to young Henry the lineal heir.

The concluding moral of the play—"Nought shall make us rue, / If England to itself do rest but true"—is spoken by the Bastard (5.7.117-18). But its meaning does not now point to a being true to the spirit of John. The "old right" which the barons named as their intention when returning to John has become basic to England's remaining true to itself. Professor Honigmann has remarked perceptively, it seems to me, that the "right" which triumphs at the end of the play is a child figure suggestive of "Arthur resurrected as Prince Henry."<sup>6</sup> The nobles have discovered their need for an allegiance that transcends not only commodity-serving but also revenge. Having been gratuitously rescued from the dangers of revenge they become peace-makers. As such they turn the Bastard to a higher allegiance and thereby complete Hubert's work of intervention after his own conversion by Arthur. Aiding providential "washes," they tame the Bastard's "braves."

Indiana University  
Bloomington

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See Virginia Mason Carr, *The Drama as Propaganda: A Study of The Troublesome Raigne of King John* (Salzburg, Austria: Institut für Englische Sprache, 1974) 118.

<sup>2</sup>James C. Bryant, in *Tudor Drama and Religious Controversy* (Mercer University Press, 1984) 133, assumes that Shakespeare is simply depicting the historic Anglican position of independence from foreign domination. But this supposition overlooks the chip-on-the-shoulder tone of John's speech and the contextual irony of John's situation.

<sup>3</sup>Emrys Jones makes this point in his *The Origins of Shakespeare* (Oxford: OUP, 1977) 241.

<sup>4</sup>Gerald Greenewald, *Shakespeare's Attitude Toward the Catholic Church in King John* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1938), 121-134, blindly argues that this speech is without any sophistry and "completely in harmony with the Catholic doctrine of oaths" (128).

<sup>5</sup>See Robert D. Stevick, "'Repentant Ashes': The Matrix of 'Shakespearean' Poetry," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 12 (1962): 366-70.

<sup>6</sup>Arden edition of *King John* (London: Methuen, 1954) lxxv.