SHAKESPEARE'S
HISTORY OF KING JOHN.

EDITED BY

WILLIAM J. ROLFE.


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HISTORY OF

THE LIFE AND DEATH

OF

KING JOHN.

EDITED, WITH NOTES,

BY

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KING JOHN.

INTRODUCTION

TO

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF KING JOHN.

I. THE HISTORY OF THE PLAY.

King John was first printed in the folio of 1623, where it is entitled "The life and death of King Iohn," and occupies pages 1–22 in the division of "Histories." It is the only one of the undoubted works of Shakespeare which is not entered in the Registers of the Stationers' Company. Internal evidence shows pretty clearly that it was written at about the same time as *Richard II.;* and it is probable that it

followed rather than preceded that play. We cannot be far wrong if, with Furnivall, we assign it to the year 1595. Dowden (*Shaks. Primer*, p. 90) also says: "The chief point of difference with respect to form is that *Richard II.* contains a much larger proportion of rhymed verse, and on the whole we shall not perhaps err in regarding *Richard II.* as the earlier of the two." Prof. Ward (*Eng. Dram. Lit.* vol. i. p. 368) remarks that "the play evidently belongs to the same period of Shakspere's productivity as *Richard II.*, and may be dated about the same time; probably before the body of those in which he mainly followed Holinshed." Fleay makes the date 1596, seeing in i. 2. 66–75, as certain other critics have done, an allusion to the fleet sent against Spain in that year. He believes also that "the laments of Constance for Arthur's death (iii. 4) were inspired by Shakespeare's sorrow for his heir and only son, Hamnet, whom he lost August 12, 1596." As it is included in Meres's list in his *Palladis Tamia* (see *M. N. D.* p. 9), it must have been put upon the stage before the publication of that book in September, 1598.

II. THE SOURCES OF THE PLOT.

King John varies from the facts of history more than any other of the "Histories," being founded upon an earlier play published in 1591 with the following title-page, of which Halliwell gives a fac-simile:—

THE | Troublesome Raigne | of *Iohn* King of *England*, with the dis- | *couerie of King* Richard Cordelions | Base sonne (vulgarly named, The Ba- | stard Fawconbridge): *also the* | death of King *Iohn* at *Swinstead* | *Abbey.* | *As it was* (*sundry times*) *publikely acted by the* | *Queenes Maiesties Players, in the ho-* | *nourable Citie of* | London. Imprinted at London for *Sampson Clarke*, | *and are to be solde at his shop, on the backe-* | side of the *Royall Exchange.* | 1591.

In the year 1611 this play was reprinted "by Valentine Simmes for John Helme," with "Written by W. Sh." added

to the title-page; and in a third edition, printed "by Aug: Mathewes for Thomas Dewe," and brought out in 1622, it was ascribed to "W. Shakespeare." This was doubtless a mere trick of the publishers to help the sale of the book, as the style proves conclusively that Shakespeare had no part in its authorship.

While the poet follows this old play in the outlines of his plot, and occasionally borrows its language, his real indebtedness to it is comparatively slight. "The main incidents are the same, but Shakspere elevates and almost re-creates the characters; for the most eloquent and poetical passages no original is to be found in the old play. The character of the king grows more darkly treacherous in Shakspere's hands: barely a hint of the earlier author suggested the scene, so powerful and so subtle, in which John insinuates to Hubert his murderous desires; the boyish innocence of Arthur, and the pathos of his life, become real and living as they are dealt with by the imagination of Shakspere; Constance is no longer a fierce and ambitious virago, but a passionate sorrowing mother; Faulconbridge is ennobled by a manly tenderness and a purer patriotism. Shakspere depicts, with true English spirit, the ambition, the political greed, the faithlessness, the sophistry, of the court of Rome; but he wholly omits a ribald scene of the old play, in which the licentiousness of monasteries is exposed to ridicule" (Dowden).

Gervinus, after remarking that "Shakespeare entirely followed this older work in the historical matter," goes on to say: "Artistically considered, he took in the outward design of the piece, blended both parts into one, adhered to the leading features of the characters, and finished them with finer touches. . . . The older *King John* is a rough but not a bad piece, from which the poet could have borrowed many happy poetical and historical features. It possesses the old stiffness, and is intermingled with Latin passages according

to the earlier custom, yet it is freer from the extravagances of the old school, from which these historical subjects in a great measure rescued us. The diffuseness in the second part is heavy, and here Shakespeare with excellent tact has remedied the evil by abridgment. The characters are designed in a manner suitable for our poet's use, but they are far less sustained than his. For the mere sake of speaking, speeches are put into the mouth of Faulconbridge which are inconsistent with his nature. Arthur, who once speaks in the childish tone of his age, loses it again, and in the pathetic scene with Hubert is a precocious disputant. How far Shakespeare excelled his best contemporary poets in fine feeling is evinced by his revised work as compared with this older play. Shakespeare delineates his Faulconbridge (and himself in him) rigidly and bitterly enough as a good Protestant in the base treatment of Popish arrogance. In suitable passages he gives full vent to the indignation of the English at Popish rule and intrigue, encroachment and oppression, which at that time was readily listened to in London. But he did not go so far as to make a farce of Faulconbridge's extortions from the clergy; . . . to our poet's impartial mind the dignity of the clergy, nay, even the contemplativeness of cloister-life, was a matter too sacred for him to introduce it in a ridiculous form into the seriousness of history. There are many similar crudenesses in the old piece, which Shakespeare has likewise effaced. At the marriage treaty between Lewis and Blanche, the poor Constance is present; at the indelicate discussion (i. 1) between the brothers Faulconbridge, their mother is introduced; the illegitimate son subsequently threatens his own mother with death if she does not confess the truth to him: this lack of tenderness does not occur in Shakespeare. In another respect also the accurate comparison of the two works is of the greatest interest, if we would watch Shakespeare's depth in the treatment of his poetry, as it were, in the work and in

the creation itself. In many passages of the old play, where motives, delineation of character and actions, lay before him in ample prolixity, he has gathered the contents of whole scenes compactly into a single sentence or a single insinuation; he disdains superabundant perspicuity, and leaves to the actor, the spectator, and the reader something for his own mind to find out and to add."

III. CRITICAL COMMENTS ON THE PLAY.

[*From Mrs. Jameson's "Characteristics of Women."* *]

Constance of Bretagne was the only daughter and heiress of Conan IV., Duke of Bretagne; her mother was Margaret of Scotland, the eldest daughter of Malcolm IV. But little mention is made of this princess in the old histories; but she appears to have inherited some portion of the talent and spirit of her father, and to have transmitted them to her daughter. The misfortunes of Constance may be said to have commenced before her birth, and took their rise in the misconduct of one of her female ancestors. Her great-grandmother Matilda, the wife of Conan III., was distinguished by her beauty and imperious temper, and not less by her gallantries. Her husband, not thinking proper to repudiate her during his lifetime, contented himself with disinheriting her son Hoel, whom he declared illegitimate; and bequeathed his dukedom to his daughter Bertha, and her husband Allan the Black, Earl of Richmond, who were proclaimed and acknowledged Duke and Duchess of Bretagne.

Prince Hoel, so far from acquiescing in his father's will, immediately levied an army to maintain his rights, and a civil war ensued between the brother and sister, which lasted for twelve or fourteen years. Bertha, whose reputation was not much fairer than that of her mother Matilda, was succeeded by her son Conan IV. He was young, and of a feeble, vacillating temper, and after struggling for a few years

* American ed. (Boston, 1857), p. 358 fol.

against the increasing power of his uncle Hoel, and his own rebellious barons, he called in the aid of that politic and ambitious monarch, Henry II. of England. This fatal step decided the fate of his crown and his posterity; from the moment the English set foot in Bretagne, that miserable country became a scene of horrors and crimes—oppression and perfidy on the one hand, unavailing struggles on the other. Ten years of civil discord ensued, during which the greatest part of Bretagne was desolated, and nearly a third of the population carried off by famine and pestilence. In the end, Conan was secured in the possession of his throne by the assistance of the English king, who, equally subtle and ambitious, contrived in the course of this warfare to strip Conan of most of his provinces by successive treaties, alienate the Breton nobles from their lawful sovereign, and at length render the Duke himself the mere vassal of his power.

In the midst of these scenes of turbulence and bloodshed was Constance born, in the year 1164. The English king consummated his perfidious scheme of policy, by seizing on the person of the infant princess, before she was three years old, as a hostage for her father. Afterwards, by contracting her in marriage to his third son, Geoffrey Plantagenet, he ensured, as he thought, the possession of the duchy of Bretagne to his own posterity.

From this time we hear no more of the weak, unhappy Conan, who, retiring from a fruitless contest, hid himself in some obscure retreat; even the date of his death is unknown. Meanwhile Henry openly claimed the duchy in behalf of his son Geoffrey and the Lady Constance; and their claims not being immediately acknowledged, he invaded Bretagne with a large army, laid waste the country, bribed or forced some of the barons into submission, murdered or imprisoned others, and, by the most treacherous and barbarous policy, contrived to keep possession of the country he had thus seized. However, in order to satisfy the Bretons, who were

attached to the race of their ancient sovereigns, and to give some colour to his usurpation, he caused Geoffrey and Constance to be solemnly crowned at Rennes as Duke and Duchess of Bretagne. This was in the year 1169, when Constance was five and Prince Geoffrey about eight years old. His father, Henry, continued to rule, or rather to ravage and oppress, the country in their name for about fourteen years, during which period we do not hear of Constance. She appears to have been kept in a species of constraint as a hostage rather than a sovereign; while her husband Geoffrey, as he grew up to manhood, was too much engaged in keeping the Bretons in order, and disputing his rights with his father, to think about the completion of his union with Constance, although his sole title to the dukedom was properly and legally in right of his wife. At length, in 1182, the nuptials were formally celebrated, Constance being then in her nineteenth year. At the same time, she was recognized as Duchess of Bretagne *de son chef* (that is, in her own right) by two acts of legislation, which are still preserved among the records of Bretagne, and bear her own seal and signature.

Those domestic feuds which embittered the whole life of Henry II., and at length broke his heart, are well known. Of all his sons, who were in continual rebellion against him, Geoffrey was the most undutiful and the most formidable: he had all the pride of the Plantagenets, all the warlike accomplishments of his two elder brothers, Henry and Richard; and was the only one who could compete with his father in talent, eloquence, and dissimulation. No sooner was he the husband of Constance, and in possession of the throne of Bretagne, than he openly opposed his father; in other words, he maintained the honour and interests of his wife and her unhappy country against the cruelties and oppression of the English plunderers.* About three years

* *Vide* Daru, *Histoire de Bretagne.*

after his marriage, he was invited to Paris for the purpose of concluding a league, offensive and defensive, with the French king; in this journey he was accompanied by the Duchess Constance, and they were received and entertained with royal magnificence. Geoffrey, who excelled in all chivalrous accomplishments, distinguished himself in the tournaments which were celebrated on the occasion; but unfortunately, after an encounter with a French knight celebrated for his prowess, he was accidentally flung from his horse, and trampled to death in the lists before he could be extricated.

Constance, being now left a widow, returned to Bretagne, where her barons rallied round her, and acknowledged her as their sovereign. The Salique law did not prevail in Bretagne, and it appears that in those times the power of a female to possess and transmit the rights of sovereignty had been recognized in several instances; but Constance is the first woman who exercised those rights in her own person. She had one daughter, Elinor, born in the second year of her marriage, and a few months after her husband's death she gave birth to a son. The States of Bretagne were filled with exultation; they required that the infant prince should not bear the name of his father—a name which Constance, in fond remembrance of her husband, would have bestowed on him—still less that of his grandfather Henry; but that of Arthur, the redoubted hero of their country, whose memory was worshipped by the populace. Though the Arthur of romantic and fairy legends—the Arthur of the Round Table, had been dead for six centuries, they still looked for his second appearance among them, according to the prophecy of Merlin; and now, with fond and short-sighted enthusiasm, fixed their hopes on the young Arthur as one destined to redeem the glory and independence of their oppressed and miserable country. But in the very midst of the rejoicings which succeeded the birth of the prince, his grandfather,