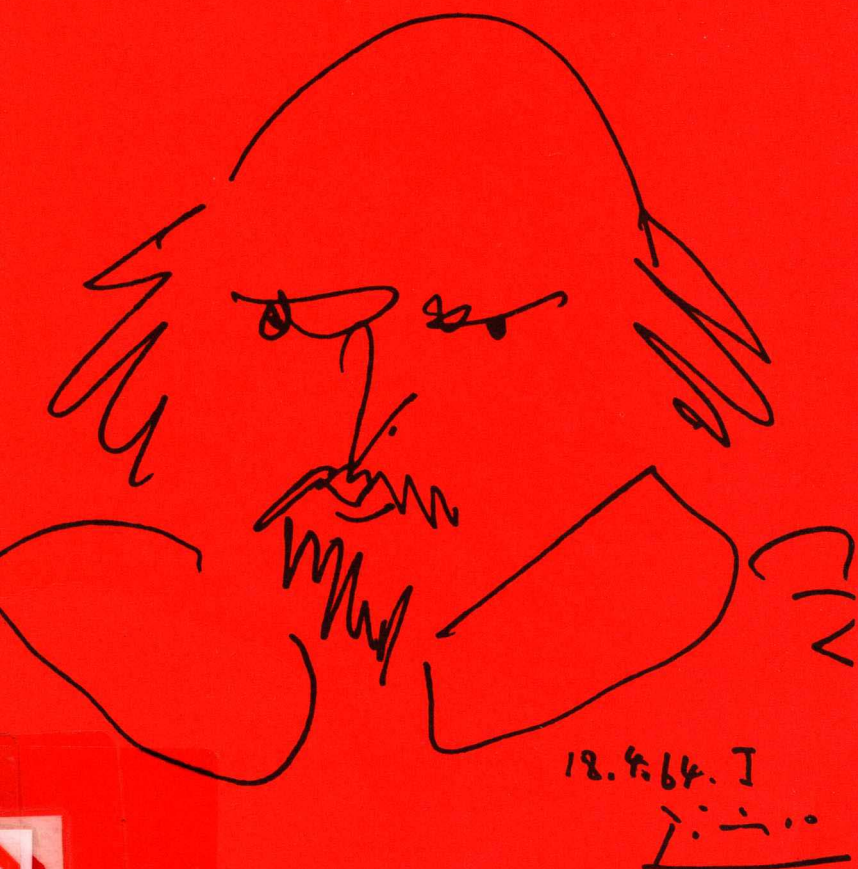


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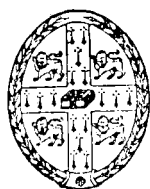
King John



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KING JOHN

Shakespeare's *Life and Death of King John* is not from the literary standpoint one of his best or most interesting plays, and though, as I am told by actors who have played it, by no means ineffective in the theatre, it is rarely seen upon the modern stage. Nor is there any external evidence of its popularity during the lifetime of its author. It was, however, essentially a topical play, and there were occasions during the period 1590-1610 when it might well have secured excited audiences. Probably, as we shall find, first performed quite early in his career, it seems to have been originally drafted in haste, though the inconsistencies and confusions of the received text may possibly be due in part to later revision.

'The tragedy,' writes Dr Johnson, 'is varied with a very pleasing interchange of incidents and characters. The Lady's grief is very affecting, and the character of the Bastard contains that mixture of greatness and levity which this author delighted to exhibit.' It is full also of lines and passages which only Shakespeare could have penned. Yet we seldom feel that the pen was dipped in his own heart's blood; and if the much-praised, and over-praised, portrait of the boy Arthur be really the dramatist's obituary notice of his own son, as many have supposed, his paternal affection must have been conventional and frigid to a degree which is very difficult to reconcile with the tender and passionate nature that gives warmth and reality to his later dramas. Indeed, if the death of Hamnet Shakespeare in 1596 meant anything to Shakespeare, Constance's lamentations must surely have been written before that event taught him what true grief was. In a word, our lack of interest in *King John* seems chiefly due to a certain lack of interest on the part of the author. It was, we may guess, one of

those plays which he originally wrote to supply the needs of his company for a special occasion, while his mind was engaged elsewhere, perhaps with the composition of *Richard II*, which seems to be closer to it than any other of his plays.

Nevertheless, there are two points of special interest about *King John*: (i) it is, as I shall endeavour to show, an indisputable example of textual revision, and the only one in which the source-play has come down to us¹; and (ii) it is the only occasion on which Shakespeare deals directly with the main issue of his age, viz. the religious question and the conflict between the English monarchy and the Papacy. The introduction that follows will be principally concerned with these two matters, which have a connecting link in the relation between Shakespeare's *King John* and the John of history—history in Shakespeare's day and our own.

I

King John in history, modern and Elizabethan

King John, perhaps the most gifted, certainly the wickedest and most tyrannical, king who ever sat upon an English throne, would make a popular subject for a modern film-play. Latest born of a long family, he reached power as unexpectedly as the disinherited youth who is the favourite hero of fairy story and romance. Short of stature and, if the effigy on his tomb at Worcester is to be trusted, a little effeminate in appearance, he had something childlike about him which appealed for an indulgence he in no way deserved. He was pitifully nicknamed Lackland in his cradle by a father who had settled all the Angevin dominions upon his elder brothers

¹ *King Leir and his Three Daughters*, the other extant drama he is known to have used, is not a source-play in this sense.

before he was born at Oxford in 1167; he was still drawing upon the same pity twenty-six years later when Richard I pardoned a treacherous rebellion with a brotherly kiss and the words 'Thou art but a child, and hast been left to ill guardians'; and one may suspect that the fascination of women for his comely person, a fascination he exploited to the full, called out the mother in them as much as the mistress. For his vices were also those of a spoilt child. He had his full share of the violent passions of his race but never learnt to control them; he would grovel upon the ground in insane fits of anger, screaming aloud and gnawing at straws; while he shewed neither mercy nor pity for those who crossed the desire of his eye or the lusts of his flesh.

In an epoch when the power of the Church and the glory of kingship were at their height he seemed to be entirely lacking in reverence or a sense of personal dignity. He scoffed publicly at sacred things, bandying lewd jests upon them with his cronies in Rouen cathedral at the very moment of his coronation as Duke of Normandy, and welcoming the papal interdict as an opportunity for the greedy enjoyment of church property. The most brilliant strategist of his age, he nevertheless preferred the amusement of harrying the peaceful countryside and burning cornfields to pitched battles, in which he seldom engaged until he had first made sure that ample desertions from the opposing force would give him victory. Insensitive to the claims of honour, amazingly devoid of self-respect, and yet gifted with an intellect as subtle and as powerful as any in Europe, he baffled friends and enemies alike from first to last. He knew when he was beaten; found small attraction in defending a losing cause; shrank from no humiliation to save his skin or to gain his ends; and was never more dangerous than when he seemed most at a loss. Even when finally at bay, with a French army on English soil, his treasure engulfed in the Wash and himself

deserted by all save mercenaries, he might not impossibly have contrived one more chicane and perhaps played a winning hand for many years, had he not chosen that moment to overeat himself like a gluttonous schoolboy, and so brought on the fit of dysentery from which he died. Yet his exit was probably well-timed; for he had at last met his match in Stephen Langton, a man as clever as himself, but with a sense of values and an understanding of human nature quite beyond his ken. Indeed, the entry on the stage of Nemesis in the person of Langton, representative of the best traditions of our character and statesmanship, and founder of our liberties, brings the tragedy of the English Nero to a magnificently appropriate catastrophe.

It is not surprising that such a man seemed in the eyes of his contemporaries a monster who beggared description: 'Nature's enemy' is how one chronicler sums him up, while another exclaims 'Foul as it is, hell itself is defiled by the fouler presence of John.' And modern historians echo the verdict in modern terms. 'The closer study of John's history,' writes John Richard Green in a passage that John's best-known biographer, Kate Norgate, takes as her text, 'clears away the charges of sloth and incapacity with which men tried to explain the greatness of his fall. The awful lesson of his life rests on the fact that the king who lost Normandy, became the vassal of the Pope, and perished in a struggle of despair against English freedom was no weak and indolent voluptuary but the ablest and most ruthless of the Angevins.' And a living historian, Professor Powicke, draws substantially the same portrait, though in slightly different perspective¹.

What Green called the awful lessons of history are the dramatist's opportunity; and the character of John might have set Marlowe dreaming of an addition to his gallery

¹ *Cambridge Medieval History*, vi, 219-20.

of supermen or Shakespeare fashioning a villain who would combine the foppery of Richard II with the devilry of Richard III, had either of them been allowed to catch sight of 'nature's enemy' in the mirror they held up to nature. But John's real features, as seen by Roger of Wendover, Kate Norgate and Professor Powicke, were obscured for most Elizabethans by the pre-occupations of the age in which they lived. His iniquities had brought two forces stronger than himself into the field: the Papacy, which he angered by his high-handed dealing with ecclesiastical affairs, and the English baronage, temporarily united, and protesting in the name of the whole English people against his tyrannical practices. This second issue, which culminated in the Great Charter of 1215, had no special meaning for Shakespeare and his contemporaries. With the Wars of the Roses immediately behind them, and rejoicing like Nazi Germany in a strong executive as the only security against social anarchy and national decay, they regarded the Charter, if they thought about it at all, as the treasonable innovation of a rebellious nobility, a point of view, indeed, not unlike that of a recent French scholar, who speaks of it as 'essentially an act of feudal reaction against the progress of an encroaching royal administration and an arbitrary fiscal system¹.' For, what another historian of our time has called 'the myth of Magna Carta²' did not begin to take hold of men's

¹ Charles Petit Dutaillis and Georges Lefebvre, *Studies and Notes Supplementary to Stubbs' Constitutional History*, iii (Manchester University Press, 1929), 316.

² E. Jenks, 'The Myth of Magna Carta' (*Independent Review*, Nov. 1904, pp. 260-73). A corrective to these extreme views may be found in Professor Powicke's chapter on John already cited from the *Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. vi. While admitting that 'the real history of the Great Charter belongs to a later age,' he points out that 'as a whole it reflected the best and most stable feeling of Englishmen, of the moderate barons, the bishops and the trained admini-

minds until Parliament found itself at loggerheads with the Stuarts, or become an accepted corner-stone of English political philosophy until the Hanoverians had acknowledged the Whig successors of John's barons as partners in the Constitution. Englishmen of Tudor times were fascinated by the other issue. To most of them John appeared, not as the enemy of liberty, but as its champion, as the one medieval king who had openly withstood the Pope for many years and who, according to a legend they accepted with avidity, met his death from poison administered by a treacherous monk. It is as a valiant precursor of the Reformation that John makes his first appearance in dramatic literature.

On January 2, 1539, six years after the marriage of Henry VIII to Anne Boleyn and the elevation of Cranmer to the see of Canterbury, a company of actors under the direction of one 'Bale' were performing a play 'in Christmas time at my lord of Canterbury's,' from which might be 'perceived King John was as noble a prince as ever was in England, and...that he was the beginning of the putting down of the Bishop in Rome.' The company probably belonged to my Lord Cromwell; the 'Bale' who led it was with little doubt John Bale, a clerical writer of violent Protestant moralities who was later created Bishop of Ossory; and the interlude spoken of can hardly be any other than Bale's *King Johan*¹. In this strange, formless blend of

strators,' as is proved by 'the fact that in its revised form it was issued after John's death by the legate, William the Marshal, Hubert de Burgh and other royalists,' in which form 'it was regarded as a definite settlement of the law which regulated the relations between the Crown and the vassals and the administrators of justice and finance,' *ibid.* p. 245.

¹ v. pp. xvii-xviii, Introduction to Bale's *King Johan* (Malone Society Reprints).

morality-play, chronicle and Protestant pamphlet, which has come down to us in a version dating from the early days of Elizabeth, John's beatification finds its most fervent celebration, and to what lengths Bale's zeal carried him may be seen from the words of the Interpreter at the conclusion of the first part:

Thys noble kynge Iohan, as a faythfull Moyses
withstode proude Pharao, for hys poore Israel,
Myndynge to brynge it, out of the lande of Darkenesse
But the Egyptyanes, ded agaynst hym so rebell
That hys poore people, ded styll in the desart dwell
Tyll that Duke Iosue, whych was our late kynge Henrye
Clerely brought vs in, to the lande of mylke and honye.

Bale was a fanatic; and actually represents Langton planning John's death with the poisoner. Yet he was honest according to his lights, and firmly believed that John's character and actions had been grossly misrepresented by the monkish chroniclers of the middle ages in their anxiety to defend the Roman Church. 'Veryte,' a character whom he brings on to the stage after the death of his hero, trounces the chroniclers in long speeches, the tenour of which may be gleaned from two brief extracts:

I assure ye fryndes, lete men wryte what they wyll,
kynge Iohan was a man, both valeaunt and godlye
what though Polydorus, reporteth hym very yll
At the suggestyons, of the malicyouse clergye
Thynke yow a Romane, with the Romanes can not lye?

And, again, this time addressing the 'Romanes' direct:

ye were neuer wele, tyll ye had hym cruelly slayne
And now beyng dead ye have hym styll in disdayne;
ye haue rayسد vp of hym most shamelesse lyes
Both by your reportes, and by your written storyes¹.

Nor is the point of view peculiar to Bale. We are not surprised to find it running as an undercurrent through

¹ Bale's *King Johan*, *op. cit.* ll. 2145-49, 2239-42.

the chapters on John in Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*. But it is rather remarkable that Holinshed, the greatest of Elizabethan historiographers, with the medieval chronicles before him and concerned to write history and not a Protestant homily, should go further out of his way to defend the 'Moses' of the Reformation than the martyrologist himself. Witness his summary of John's character, which runs as follows:

He was comely of stature, but of looks and countenance displeasing and angry; somewhat cruel of nature, as by the writers of his time he is noted; and not so hardy as doubtful in time of peril and danger.

But this seemeth to be an envious report uttered by those that were given to speak no good of him whom they inwardly hated.... Verily, whosoever shall consider the course of the history written of this prince, he shall find that he hath been little beholden to the writers of that time in which he lived; for uneth can they afford him a good word, except when the truth enforceth them to come out with it, as it were, against their wills. And the occasion, as some think, was for that he was no great friend to the clergy.... Certainly, it should seem the man had a princely heart in him and wanted nothing but faithful subjects to have wroken himself of such wrongs as were done and offered to him by the French king and others. Moreover, the pride and pretended authority of the clergy he could not well abide, when they went about to wrest out of his hands the prerogative of his princely rule and government. True it is, that to maintain his wars which he was forced to take in hand, as well in France as elsewhere, he was constrained to make all the shift he could devise to recover money, and because he pinched at their purses, they conceived no small hatred against him; which when he perceived, and wanted peradventure discretion to pass it over, he discovered now and then in his rages his immoderate displeasure, as one not able to bridle his affections, a thing very hard in a stout stomach, and thereby he missed now and then to compass that which otherwise he might very well have brought to pass¹

¹ Holinshed, *Chronicles*, ed. 1577 (ii, 606).

Though more judicial in tone than Bale, the argument is the same. Nevertheless, there were points in the *acta Johanni* as related by Holinshed which were difficult to square with the portrait of a Protestant saint and martyr. And in *The Troublesome Reign of King John*, the next dramatic study of John's character, to be considered immediately, we shall find the lines drawn with less confidence, while the entirely fictitious account of his pursuit of the unhappy Matilda which forms the main interest of Munday and Chettle's *Death of Robert Earl of Huntingdon*, printed in 1601, brings us nearer to the real John of history than any of the earlier dramatic portraits¹, except perhaps Shakespeare's.

Holinshed, who wrote without a thought of the stage in his mind, was nevertheless the father of many plays; and the publication of his *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* in 1577, which gathered together and completed the efforts of previous Tudor chroniclers, marks a turning-point in the history of Tudor drama. For the book, inspired by the new-found sense of national unity and purpose which was the mainspring of Elizabethan activity in every field, immensely quickened that sense in thousands of English playgoers by providing the dramatists of the day with material for a corpus of drama which mirrored the history of England with scarcely a break from before the Conquest to the defeat of the Spanish Armada. Indeed, in his 'defence of plays' written four years later than that victory, Nashe gives pride of place to their patriotic interest, seeing that

the subiect of them (for the most part).. is borrowed out of our English Chronicles, wherein our forefathers valiant

¹ As author of the play *Sir Thomas Moore*, to say nothing of *The English Roman Life*, Munday may be suspected of possessing a better understanding of the Catholic standpoint than violent Protestants like Bale and the dramatist responsible for *The Troublesome Reign*.

acts (that have line long buried in rustie brasse and worm-eaten bookes) are reuiued, and they themselues raised from the Graue of obliuion, and brought to pleade their aged Honours in open presence: than which, what can be a sharper reproofe to these degenerate effeminate dayes of ours¹?

That Holinshed and those who distilled his *Chronicles* for the benefit of the public at large held a conception of history very different from our own is nothing to their dishonour. Living in a prescientific age, when prodigies and heavenly portents were credited in the opinion of the best and wisest with an influence upon the fortunes of states and monarchs as undoubted as it was incalculable, they were in duty bound to record all such phenomena as they could learn of. Lord Chancellor Bacon himself does not hesitate to do so in his *History of Henry VII*. Accepting without question, for reasons already glanced at, absolute monarchy as the highest form of human polity, it did not occur to them that anything much besides the doings of kings, whether at home or in the field, was worth a chronicler's pains. Apparently the only extant play of the time which represents parliament upon the stage is Shakespeare's *Richard II*, and even there it figures merely as the shadowy background to a king's deposition². The silence, then, of Shakespeare's *King John* and its dramatic precursors on the subject of the Magna Carta needs neither excuse nor explanation. It should not be forgotten, moreover, that political prepossession and theatrical convenience were alike served by the blindness of the age to the constitutional struggles and social movements which give history its meaning in our eyes. Such topics are not readily amenable to stage-representation; the fortunes of

¹ *Pierce Pennilesse*, v. R. B. McKerrow, *Works of Thomas Nashe*, i, 212.

² v. W. Creizenach, *The English Drama in the time of Shakespeare*, p. 177.

monarchs are¹. Indeed, it was largely because the Elizabethans thought of politics, and the working of the universe at large, in terms of personality that the theatre became their characteristic means of literary expression. It is no accident that the greatest age of English drama took a purely dramatic view of history.

II

The source of Shakespear's play

Fourteen years after the publication of Holinshed's *Chronicles* an anonymous drama came into the printer's hand and was published in two parts during 1591 under the title of *The Troublesome Raigne of Iohn King of England, with the discouerie of King Richard Cordelions Base sonne (vulgarly named, The Bastard Fawconbridge): also the death of King Iohn at Swinstead Abbey. As it was (sundry times) publikely acted by the Queenes Maiesties Players, in the honourable 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.* Sampson Clarke was a respectable publisher and the imprint is perfectly normal. The text also is straightforward enough and contains roughly about 2800 lines, which makes it some 100 lines shorter than *Edward I*, a drama almost certainly by the same playwright, and some 300 lines longer than Shakespeare's play. The only peculiarity about it, indeed, is its publication in two parts, there being no obvious dramatic reason for the division. It seems that having secured a single play, the publisher attempted to make double profit out of it

¹ Elizabethan dramatists were, of course, alive to the existence of the 'commons' and popular political aspirations, and their attitude towards these may be seen in the Jack Cade scenes of 2 *Henry VI* or the insurrection scene of *Sir Thomas Moore*.

by issuing it as two books. Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, a genuine two-part play, had appeared from the press of Richard Jones in the previous year, so that the play-reading public would be ready to be thus deceived. It looks, moreover, as if the author of the play lent a hand in the deception by pretending that it formed a kind of sequel to Marlowe's. Each part is prefaced with an address in verse 'To the Gentlemen Readers,' which though specially written for the publication¹ is in a style very similar to that of the play; and the first of them, beginning

You that with friendly grace of smoothed brow
 Haue entertaind the Scythian Tamburlaine,
 And giuen applause vnto an Infidel:
 Vouchsafe to welcome (with like curtesie)
 A warlike Christian and your Countreyman,

deliberately recalls Marlowe's famous twin-drama, which had taken London by storm on the stage, had probably been a great success when it appeared in print, and was also furnished with a brief prologue to each part².

The point is important as regards date. If the lines just quoted belong to a dramatic prologue, then *The Troublesome Reign* must have been written for performance shortly after *Tamburlaine* was first acted, that is to say before the end of 1587³. But, once they are seen to have been written for publication in 1591, the need for

¹ This is proved by the last line of the first address.

And think it was prepared for your disport,
 which is clearly a request to readers to imagine themselves as spectators.

² The fact that Marlowe's *Edward II* was likewise called '*The Troublesome Raigne*' on the title-page of 1594 suggests further possibilities of catch-penny faking. The date of *Edward II*'s first performance is, however, unfortunately unknown.

³ v. letter by Sir E. K. Chambers in *Times Literary Supplement*, Aug. 28, 1930.

linking the composition of the play to that of Marlowe's disappears. Nevertheless, as Sir Edmund Chambers notes, 'the tone is that of the Armada period¹,' and a play so fervently patriotic and so fiercely anti-papal may well belong to 1588 or 1589.

It is generally assumed that *The Troublesome Reign* owes nothing to Bale's play, though the hatred of the Papacy which it breathes, together with the claim of the prologue just quoted that John was

A Warlike Christian and your Countreyman,
and that

For Christs true faith indur'd he many a storme,
And set himselfe against the Man of Rome,
Vntill bafe treason (by a damned wight)
Did all his former triumphs put to flight,

indicates that it follows the same tradition. But it belongs to a different artistic category. It is a play, which Bale's amorphous dramatic tract never succeeds in becoming. Indeed, Courthope thought so highly of it that he refused to believe that anyone but Shakespeare could have written it, arguing that 'in the energy and dignity of the State debates, the life of the incidents, the variety and contrast of the characters, and the power of conceiving the onward movement of a great historical action, there is a quality of dramatic workmanship... quite above the genius of Peele, Greene, or even Marlowe².' This is one of the curiosities of criticism, and the attribution to Shakespeare has found scant support elsewhere. But it serves to bring out the virtues of a play which is in some ways better constructed than *King John*.

Most critics who have written upon the subject take for granted that Shakespeare derived his play from *The Troublesome Reign*. Close affinity between the two is undeniable; but the priority of the inferior text no longer

¹ *Elizabethan Stage*, iv, 24.

² W. J. Courthope, *History of English Poetry*, iv, 465.

goes without saying, as it used to in the days before Dr Pollard recognised 'bad quartos' as a special class by themselves, Dr Greg demonstrated that the extant text of Greene's *Orlando Furioso*, published in 1594, was printed, not from the author's manuscript or even from an authorised prompt-book, but from a garbled and reported compilation got together by actors who had taken part in the authentic play¹, and Professor Peter Alexander put up a strong case for believing that *The first part of the Contention betwixt the two famous Houses of Yorke and Lancaster* (pub. 1594), *The True Tragedie of Richard Duke of Yorke* (pub. 1595) and *The Taming of a Shrew* (pub. 1594) were bad quartos which stood in similar relationship to parts 2 and 3 of Shakespeare's *Henry VI* and *The Taming of the Shrew*². From the bibliographical point of view *The Troublesome Reign* is not a 'bad' quarto; but is there not something suspicious about it? May it not be derived from Shakespeare's play, instead of the other way about? Is it not perhaps an attempt by some unscrupulous person to make profit out of Shakespeare's success by furnishing a rival company with another text closely modelled upon his? Or was it even designed for the stage at all? Is it not rather a vamped up playbook, written expressly for publication, as its prologues undoubtedly were; a catch-penny production, possibly of some needy playwright like Peele, sold to a publisher at a time when Shakespeare was making *King John* famous in London, and intended to be accepted by ignorant readers as his? This last intention is indeed patent in the second quarto, published in 1611, with the words 'Written by W. Sh.' on its title-page, and unblushing in the third quarto of 1622, which shamelessly expands the 'W. Sh.' to 'W. Shakespeare.'

¹ *Alcazar and Orlando*, W. W. Greg, 1923.

² *Shakespeare's Henry VI and Richard III*, Peter Alexander, 1929.