Historicity and Religiosity in Shakespeare’s Medieval play *King John*

Michael RANDOLPH*

*King John* one of two ‘history’ plays in Shakespeare’s canon that is not part of a tetralogy has largely been ignored and dismissed by generations of critics. Based on the history of an early, and traditionally reviled Medieval English king, the story of *King John* was one quite topical to Elizabethan England in light of the Tudor’s ongoing political conflicts with the powerful Church of Rome. Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*, Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, Bale’s *King Iohan*, the anonymous *The Troublesome Reign of King John*, all dealt with John’s resistance to the growing political power of the Catholic Church. Shakespeare’s treatment of *King John* offers an intriguing re-examination of the historical and religious elements inherent in the narrative of that king, and his ultimate influence on the shaping of what became ‘England’.

**Keywords**: *King John*, Bastard, Usurpation, Religious, Legitimate

---

*King John*, written sometime between 1590-1596 after Shakespeare’s first sweeping Henriad is a play that has gotten remarkably little attention, far less than it actually deserves. Its episodic formula and the downfall of a character reviled by history, in art and in literature, as been largely neglected. Shakespeare took the story of *King John* told in various histories and chronicles, along with extant plays like *King Iohan*, and the *Troublesome Reign of King John*, and created his own unique version of the story. How are the historical and religious concerns of this medieval story followed or manipulated, in order to bring new life to a long dead king?

Each era examines any previous one through the prism of its own experiences and concerns. According to Burkhardt (1996, p.143), ‘The Elizabethan world is hierarchical, not only in fact crucial but by inner necessity: it collapses if there is no one ultimate authority’. Shakespeare’s *King John*, examines authority, the interrelated issues of a ruler’s legitimacy, and how much authority the Church should have in the political world. An examination of how Shakespeare dealt with and shaped the historical aspects of John’s legitimacy and legacy, and how he approached the relationship between church and state in this play, should bring to light some of his con-

---

* A lecturer in the Faculty of Life Sciences, and a member of the Institute of Human Sciences at Toyo University
cepts of these issues.

The historicity of King John’s legitimacy

The historical John was born in 1166, the youngest son of Henry II and his powerful wife Eleanor of Aquitaine, whose union created the great Angevin empire, spanning all of England and a large swath of France. He was the great-grandson of William the Conqueror, through Henry II’s mother Matilda. The youngest of five sons, he wasn’t expected to inherit the English Crown. Henry’s first three sons died early, and son number four, Richard, succeeded him. There was another brother older than Richard, Geoffrey, who died before his son Arthur was born. When Richard I was killed, Arthur was an only an infant and John ruled England from 1199 to 1216.

The name John has never been bequeathed to a British monarch since 1216. Nearly eight hundred years seems a bit excessive in avoiding a name for a king. William, Henry, Edward, James, Charles, and George have all been repeated, but not John despite the fact that is was the most popular name for common males in England from the mid-sixteenth to the twentieth century.

Shakespeare’s play includes, Constance, the mother of Arthur, the Cardinal Pandulph, emissary of Pope Innocent III, Eleanor of Aquitaine, John’s mother, and a fictitious character, possibly based on real historical characters, the bastard son of Richard I, Philip Falconbridge, called ‘The Bastard’ throughout much of the play.

It is quite likely that the actual character of John, along with the highly successful smear campaign perpetrated by the Catholic Church, ascendant in the political sphere of England until the 1530’s, and the subsequent characterizations of John in literature and in inherited cultural memory of him, has discouraged the use of his name for kings in England. Saccio informs us that (1977, p.190), ‘the name John is associated with illegitimacy, but ‘of the six kings since the conquest, only one (Richard I himself) had gained the throne without dispute’.

King Philip of France, in the early part of Act II, very publicly dismisses John’s legitimacy and his right to succeed Richard. He maintains that Richard’s elder brother’s son Arthur has the right to be England’s king:


Look here upon thy brother Geoffrey’s face ;
These eyes, these brows, were moulded out of his :
This little abstract doth contain that large
Which died in Geoffrey, and the hand of time
Shall draw this brief into as huge a volume.
That Geoffrey was thy elder brother born,
And this his son ; England was Geoffrey’s right
And this is Geoffrey’s : in the name of God
How comes it then that thou art call’d a king,
He uses an argument nearer and more familiar to Tudor political thought. Saccio (1977, p.190) suggests that this ‘‘implies a firm legitimist rule of dynastic descent that was to develop only in much later times’. Under Norman law a younger son was a nearer heir to his father’s estates than the child of an elder brother who had died before the father’. (McLynn, 2007)

King John echoes the Norman position:

*Our strong possession and our right for us.*

*(II.39)*

While Eleanor argues the later, Tudor position:

*Your strong possession much more than your right,*

*Or else it must go wrong with you and me:*

*(II.41-41)*

John’s problem was that while he was King of England, as overlord of Angevin territories in France, he was technically a vassal of King Philip and had to swear fealty. Shakespeare treats the two kings as equals; they address each other as ‘England’ and ‘France’. King Philip wanted to consolidate the very wealthy Norman territories into his realm of France. His backing of Arthur in Shakespeare’s play, is more or less historically accurate, except that before they met at Angiers according to Holinshead when King Philip avowedly said:

*‘About the same time king Philip made Arthur duke of Britaine knight, and received of him homage for Anjou, Poictiers, Maine, Touraine, and Britaine.’*

*(Holinshead 160/1/6)*

But in Shakespeare, after the standoff at Angiers, King Philip is reputed to say:

*We will heal up all;*

*For we’ll create young Arthur Duke of Bretagne*

*And Earl of Richmond; and this rich fair town*
We make him lord of.
(II.1550-553)

At this time in the 12th and 13th century, the Church was on the ascendancy as a political as well as spiritual power, though it hadn’t come easily. Church (1999, p.21) asserts that ‘Kings since William the Conqueror had clearly demonstrated that papal authority could only be exercised effectively in regions controlled by a strong central authority, and then by the tolerance of the royal power. King John was well aware of that. John spent his formative years in the Abbey of Fontrevaud, and later under the tutelage of his half-brother Geoffery who was ultimately a very successful churchman. John had a very good understanding of the ways of the Church. According to McLynn (1977, p.78), ‘he devoured recondite works of theology and took them on campaign. He read them in order to mock religion, and his witty and esoteric anticlerical jokes depended on a close knowledge of Church theory and practice.

When the Pope’s high-ranking Italian emissary Pandulph enters the play, John’s immediate and vituperative comments before he makes his demands have historical resonance. While King Philip readily welcomes the ‘holy legate of the pope’, according to Shakespeare, John makes his political independence from the Church quite clear:

What earthy 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.
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 heaven, are supreme head,
So under Him that great supremacy,
Where we do reign, we will alone uphold,
Without the assistance of a mortal hand:
So tell the pope, all reverence set apart
To him and his usurp’d authority.
(III.1.73-86)

The Popes had gained much through the Crusades and their connections with the great houses of Europe,
not just politically, but also, more importantly, financially. Pope Innocent’s 1209 interdict and excommunication of King John was about more than installing Langton as Archbishop of Canterbury. McLynn (1977, p.78) asserts that Pope Innocent III ‘sought to increase revenue from the English Church in order to finance his costly projects in Sicily and Germany.’ Lunt (1999, p.297) avers that ‘In 1199, he was the first pope to impose a comprehensive income tax (of one-fortieth of their revenues) on the clergy.’ John needed money to reclaim his French territories, and after his altercation with Pandulph in King John, orders the Bastard:

_Cousin, away for England! Haste_

before:

_And, ere our coming, see thou shake the bags_

_Of hoarding abbots; imprisoned angels_

_Set at liberty: the fat ribs of peace_

_Must by the hungry now be fed upon:_

_Use our commission in his utmost force._

(III.II.16-21)

Shakespeare has condensed the timeframe of the interdiction over two acts. Historically, the interdict lasted from 1208 to 1214, thus the time frame of the play from III.I.98 to V.I 3-4 represents a period of six years. Two of the issues central to the play have been briefly touched on, but when one discusses any of the other culturally ingrained images or characterizations of King John (including Shakespeare’s), it is important to briefly examine how he came to be so reviled.

**Slandering a King for Posterity**

According to historian Trevelyan, (1942, p.45), King John was a proved traitor and ‘neer-do-weel’ who had ‘a false, selfish, and cruel nature, made to be hated.’ As recently as 2007 McLynn describes John as ‘a treacherous man who expected it in others’, that ‘he was avaricious, miserly, extortionate, and money-minded’. The same writer speculates that he ‘liked to spend money on gaming and betting,’ and comments that ‘there are hints in the sources that John’s sexual tastes ran to perversion, possibly sado-masochistic.’ This is how John has come down to succeeding generations. While John was a failure at holding on to the empire held for two generations by his family, and by many accounts was no saint, he nonetheless had many successes, his judicial reforms made application of the law much fairer and had a positive impact on the English common law system. But history and the literary account focus on the dark side of his character.

As mentioned above, John had a sincere dislike of the Church and its interference with the politics and fi-
nances of his empire. He continued the taxation and fundraising on the Church for the wars that his brother Richard I had begun. But John’s keen animosity towards the Church, captured so brilliantly by Shakespeare, and his refusal to kowtow to Church authority for so long, indeed, going so far as to impose financial sanctions on the Church during the interdict, earned him the eternal wrath of the Church. Sanctioned by the Church of Rome, a campaign was put into place to exaggerate John’s faults and weaknesses, and who better to do this than the few who were literate at the time, the chroniclers, who conveniently enough were almost all exclusively church-men. According to Gurevich and Shukman (1982, p.51), During the Medieval period, ‘the great mass of members of feudal society, including the peasants, a large part of the town dwellers and of the knights, sometimes even the monks and lower clergy were illiterate.’

Men like Ralph of Coggeshall, sixth abbot of a Cistercian order, and Matthew Paris, chronicler, artist in illuminated manuscripts, also a Benedictine monk, and centuries later, Polydore Virgil, enthroned Bishop of Bath and Wells in October 1504, all wrote quite disparagingly about John. Matthew Paris was one of the earliest and renowned of these Churchmen Chroniclers to picture John as evil King seen in illustration 1.


These writers provided the historical, cultural, and visual images that permeated the vernacular and oral history of England, reexamined by the Tudors, presented and retold by Shakespeare. They continue to reverberate on down to our own times. It seems as if King John will always be the evil king in Robin Hood.

More importantly, Gurevich and Shukman (1981, p.52) maintain that ‘even if no actual facts lay at the basis of the narrative, the author of the vision, hagiography, or saga as a rule believed in its truth. The sources for the written tradition of the Middle Ages lie overwhelmingly in the sphere of oral tradition, folklore.’ In this way, it is quite likely that the Church provided a prism through which the illiterate flock might view their rulers.

We see this clearly in the way a non-literate society can spread information about the purported murder of a child. John’s nephew Arthur, son of his deceased elder brother Geoffery is his unlikely rival for the throne of
England. Historically around the age of sixteen at this time and a real political threat, Shakespeare presents him as a much younger child. Arthur captured by John’s forces is to be murdered on John’s order, by John’s man Hubert, who is unable to kill an innocent child.

When Hubert refers to the widely it seems, rumored death of Arthur, we may reflect how the Church chroniclers might spread slander using those unlettered masse;

*Old men and beldams in the streets*
*Do prophesy upon it dangerously :*
*Young Arthur’s death is common in their mouths :*
*And when they talk of him, they shake their heads*
*And whisper one another in the ear ;*
*(IV sc. II.185-189)*

*I saw a smith stand with his hammer, thus,*
*The whilst his iron did on the anvil cool,*
*With open mouth swallowing a tailor’s news ;*
*(IV sc. II.193-195)*

*Told of a many thousand warlike French*
*That were embattailed and rank’d in Kent :*
*Another lean unwash’d artificer*
*Cuts off his tale and talks of Arthur’s death.*
*(IV sc. II I.199-203)*

Levin (1980, p.24) points out how the transformation of John had begun in the late 1520s, back when England was still Catholic and its monarch was still defender of the faith. Raphael Holinshead in 1577 pointed out the one-sidedness of the chroniclers four hundred years later by stating:

*But such was the malice of writers in times past, which they bare towards king John, that whatsoever was done in prejudice of him or his subjects, it was still interpreted to chance through his default, so as the blame still was imputed to him, in so much that although manie things he did peraduenture in matters of gouvment, fro the which he might be hardlie excused, yet to*
thynke that he desuere the tenth part of the blame wherewith
writers charge him, it might seeme a great lacke of aduised
consideration in them that should so take it.

(161 b ; P 1)

In the words of Speed (1951, p.44), ‘Had John’s story not fallen into ‘the hands of exasperated writers, he
had appeared a King of as great renown as misfortunes.’

Religion and Hypocrisy in King John

Why were the Tudor writers and playwrights so interested in resurrecting a long dead and early English
monarch who in reality wasn’t even ‘English’? These early playwrights were living in a country ruled over by
sovereigns-Henry VIII and Queen Elizabeth I, Protestant monarchs-who had challenged the authority of the
Pope and had, as a consequence, both been excommunicated (Henry in 1533, and Elizabeth in 1570), thus
Wilders (1988, p.73) asserts that it was John’s defiance of the Catholic Church that most interested them. Hence
from the time of Henry VIII, interest in the political and religious aspects of the King John story, were reawak-
ened, and consciously reexamined by Tudor era writers, for their Protestant realm.

Their efforts in highlighting the political avarice of the Church in a historical aspect were immensely suc-
cessful, widely printed, read and performed chiefly because their efforts were sanctioned by the state. The Tu-
dors (Mary excepted), a very politically astute dynasty, understood that it would be useful to establish a prece-
dence and justification for the current religious, and Protestant political status of England in the sixteenth and
early seventeenth centuries. The Church of Rome needed to be discredited in order to reduce political and social
disorder.

Tyndale and Fish in the 1520s both wrote about the John story, and John Hale was executed in 1535 for
using the King John narrative to incite the murder of Henry VIII. Moreover, John Bale published King Iohan
around 1538, followed by the anonymous The Troublesome Reign of King John (which Levin, (1980, p.31) be-
lieves probably used Foxe’s Book of Martyrs as a direct source.) This version of the story was widely read and
performed throughout the kingdom and perhaps beyond its shores, and often cited as source material for Shake-
spere’s play.

These earlier works were chiefly concerned with the King’s conflict with the church, but Shakespeare ex-
amines the religious issue in combination with the human and political consequences. Shakespeare’s play quite
cynically observes the political and personal effects that religious interference in secular matters incurs.

Until the middle of Act II Scene I, the play focuses on exclusively temporal matters. These protagonists are
chiefly concerned with rightful claims to thrones and the wealth and political benefits that accompany it. They
are uneasy about usurpation of political rights and of how succession must be legally carried out. Burkhardt (1966, p.137) points out that ‘Strong possession and right, legitimacy, (both political and familial) honor, usurpation, swords stained with blood are the words and images that permeate the conversations” (in Shakespeare’s King John).

But when King John asks Philip:

> From whom hast thou this great commission, France, 
> To draw my answer from thy articles?
> (II.I.110-111)

Philip answers:

> From that supernal judge, that stirs good thoughts 
> In any breast of strong authority, 
> To look into the blots and stains of right : 
> That judge hath made me guardian to this boy : 
> Under whose warrant I impeach thy wrong 
> And by whose help I mean to chastise it. 
> (II.I.112-117)

King John’s riposte:

> Alack, thou dost usurp authority. 
> (II.I.118)

Now usurpation has carried over from the physical and legal realm to the spiritual. (Historically we understand that as a learned man he may have been weary of the sanctimony of religion as expedient to justify any and all actions). Philip is using religious principles to meddle in the affairs of the king of an independent country. Philip claims that he works for God, and that he has no political or financial interest in supporting Arthur’s claim, but that the relief of an oppressed child is ‘religiously provoked’. II. I. 246. Up until this point in the play, Shakespeare has hinted at what will become a dominant theme in the play, how religion and God may be used for political gain.

Constance, the wife of Geoffery, John’s deceased older brother (and mother of Arthur, who is contending for John’s throne), rails at Eleanor, John’s aged’ mother and her nemesis in the struggle for power, and is first to introduce concrete religious principles into this world.

> Thy sins are visited in this poor child ; 
> The canon of the law is laid on him,
Being but the second generation
Removed from thy sin-conceiving womb.
(II.I.179-182)

She uses the word ‘sin’ four more times before line 190. In King John, Constance frequently offers references to
plague, sin, and slander. In an odd way this presages the arrival and part of the Church in the play. These after
all, are big concepts for the Church. (This how Pandulph and the French forces will ultimately bring down King
John and defame him in the eyes of posterity.) When Constance leaves the field before the battle for Angiers,
absent from the marriage negotiations, religion once again departs, until act III.

Before the battle to take Angiers, King John invokes God by stating:

The God forgive the sin of all those souls
That to their everlasting residence,
Before the dew of evening fall, shall fleet...
(II.I.283-85)

The Bastard (illegitimate son of Richard I, made a landless knight in the beginning of the play) invokes St
George, the patron saint of the English, whose symbol, St. George’s cross, was first recognized by the king of
France in 1188:

Saint George that swindg’d the dragon, and e’er since
Sits on’s horse-back at mine hostess’ door.
Teach us some fence.
(II.I.288-290)

It is noteworthy that the Bastard gets his inspiration from a cherished symbol of English nationalism, first
brought to England by Crusaders like his namesake, Richard, and not from an institution he is clearly at odds
with. It is a subtle example of his ‘Englishness’, which will escalate during the remainder of the play.

Then King Philip invokes God again:

... God and our right!
(II.I 299)

The French and English king’s religious utterances are rather like bookends to the Bastard’s call to St. George.
Act III begins with a wedding and a political compromise, but not for long. Constance states that it is ‘a wicked day and not a holy day.’ We watch Constance rage, we see King Philip befuddled by his predicament on who to prefer, his own son or Arthur, an impotent Austria, the Bastard chagrinned at his king’s reproach, and King John, cheerfully watching King Philip squirm under the wrath of Constance. It is at this moment that the Cardinal Pandulph enters. Religion makes a grand entrance into the world of King John. Pandulph sets the wheels and the rest of the play into motion.

We have already examined John’s initial response to the Cardinal and his historical reasons for doing so above. We are able to understand why John both dramatically and historically addresses Pandulph so bluntly. He stirs everything up for war, not to help Arthur, but to punish John. In the process he wrecks the newly minted peace and amity between kings, a holy wedding day, and the Church’s credibility.

How do some of the other characters feel about either religion or its emissaries? Most of them take turns either reviling it or by cozying up whenever it is expedient to do so. When Constance hears that King John will be excommunicated, and that the legate calls for his murder, she says:

\[
O, \text{ lawful let it be}
\]
\[
\text{That I have room with Rome to curse awhile!}
\]
\[
\text{Good father cardinal, cry thou amen}
\]
\[
\text{To my keen curses; for without my wrong}
\]
\[
\text{There is no tongue hath power to curse him right.}
\]
\[
(III.I.105-109)
\]

When Constance learns that the Cardinal believes that she ‘utters madness, and not sorrow’, after Arthur has been taken by John’s forces, her own sense of contempt for the Church becomes a bit more apparent when she says:

\[
\text{Preach some philosophy to make me mad,}
\]
\[
\text{And thou shalt be canoniz’d cardinal;}
\]
\[
\text{For, being not mad but sensible of grief}
\]
\[
(III.III.52-53)
\]

King Philip’s son Lewis, the Dolphin of France, while not exactly cut from a religious mold, does understand the political power that the Church wields. He recognizes (like Constance earlier) that Pandulph would gladly sacrifice Arthur to remove King John to get the Church’s revenge. He accepts the Cardinal’s plan for him to seize the English throne by stating:
Strong reasons make strong actions. Let us go:
If you say ay, the king will not say no
(III. III.182-183)

Lewis understands how pious his father is, pious enough to break a sacred oath between kings under intense pressure from the church. But when Pandulph has struck a better bargain with King John and informs Lewis that the invasion must be called off, Lewis responds much like John did in act II to the cardinal’s demands by countering:

Am I Rome’s slave? What penny hath Rome borne,
What men provided, what munition sent,
To underprop this action? Is’t not I
That undergo this charge? Who else but I,
And such as to my claim are liable,
Sweat in this business and maintain this war?
(V.II.96-101)

And shall I now give o’er the yielded set?
No, no, on my soul, it never shall be said.
(V.II.107-108)

He will not be a pawn of Rome either. Like King John, he understands that papal authority only counts when it is expedient...

The English lords Salisbury, Pembroke and Bigot, formally on the side of John make a ‘religious’ pact in Act IV. Salisbury, to avenge the murder of Arthur, swears an oath in the spirit of the Old Testament:

And breathing to his breathless excellence
The incense of a vow, a holy vow,
Never to taste the pleasures of the world,
Never to be infected with delight,
Nor conversant with ease and idleness,
Till I have set a glory to this hand,
By giving it the worship of revenge.
(IV. III.66-72)
His is the religion of revenge. Pembroke and Bigot are indeed his acolytes.

Our souls religiously confirm thy words.

(IV.III 73)

Of course what is religiously expedient now, will be a disaster for them politically, and put them into great physical danger.

Of each of the plays characters, only the Bastard is consistent in his view of the hypocrisy of the Church its form of religion in the political sphere. In Shakespeare’s version, he sees France as the pious king and one:

Whose armor conscience buckled on,
Whom zeal and charity brought to the field
As God’s own soldier …

(II.I.564-566)

When King John orders him to raise money from the Church, the Bastard’s reply implies that he has no misgivings about entering church estates and shaking them down.

Bell, book, and candle shall not drive me back,
When gold and silver becks me to come on.
I leave your highness. Grandam, I will pray,
If ever I remember to be holy,

(III.II.22-25)

Bell, book and candle refer to the closing lines of an excommunication ceremony, and we see he has no fear of this rite. He is happy to relieve them of the great wealth they have, which no doubt as formally a country squire, he witnessed firsthand on any number of occasions. While he is irreverent towards the church in the early part of the play, upon witnessing John’s death, his visceral reaction suggests that he does believe in the mystery of the afterlife.

Art thou gone so? I do but stay behind
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.
He simply has no faith of the minions of ‘God’ on earth. After all they are capable of murdering a king.

In perhaps the darkest moment in the play, where the child Arthur’s eyes are to be burned out, Shakespeare employs a political rather than a religious argument. Burckhardt (1966, pp.137-138) points out:

[Shakespeare’s] Arthur never once employs the argument of higher authority and more terrible sanctions. The king’s authority, or God’s is not once alluded to; the very words are studiously avoided—at times almost improbably.

This is an intriguing observation. While Pandulph, King Philip, and the English lords freely call on God and invoke the religious principles of obedience, retribution, and submission, most other characters have very little use for ‘religion’. The Bastard mocks it, Constance never seeks comfort from God when Arthur is taken, and both King John and Lewis merely use it as a political tool. Arthur, the innocent child, chooses a political approach to save his own life. He sees that there is a warrant for what is about to befall him and that the best solution therefore would be political. God cannot save him, but a political argument, in addition to playing the sympathy card might.

A lot has been written since John’s own times down until our own, mostly critical, of his ‘capitulation’ to the church. After a six-year interdict, and his own excommunication, John made a deal with Pope Innocent III, and submitted the realm of England to him. Many believe that it was the sign of a weak king, that John was growing desperate to both end the interdict, and to stop the French invasion after the defection of the English lords. Sibly (1966, p.417) maintains that there is a historical precedent for this train of thought.

Cranmer, for instance, speaking at the coronation of Edward VI, took care to point out that ‘Neither could your ancestors lawfully resign up their crowns to the bishop of Rome or to his legates, according to their ancient oaths taken upon this ceremony.

Yet Edward VI (and Elizabeth I’s) own grandfather, Henry VII, who also had a tenuous claim to the throne of England had submitted England to Rome as well.

Sibly further reminds us that Henry VII had tacitly acknowledged this overlordship when he obtained
both papal and parliamentary confirmation after his victory over Richard III at Bosworth.

Shakespeare undoubtedly knew this, and in his play, clearly took pains to show the political importance of John’s bargain with, and ostensible submission to Pope Innocent III.

Many critics of King John choose to buy into the chronicler’s accounts of John and see him as a weak and ineffective ruler. Bonjour (1951, P.264) echoes that sentiment by stating:

It is only at this point [in 1216] that the King collapses: this is proved, of course, by his act of submission to the Legate. A parallel with the Troublesome Reign shows us that Shakespeare wanted to make John’s yielding of the crown to Pandulph an act of sheer weakness:

But was it weakness or a shrewd political move? John, by submitting to papal authority made the rebellious lords outlaw in the eyes of the powerful church, de-legitimized the French claim to the English throne and guaranteed that his descendants’ would maintain power over an England growing wealthier each generation. As Fouracre (2008, P.319) points out, without Papal support, his dynasty would not have survived.

This astonished monkish chroniclers but was the wisest move of his life. If Langton remained unreliable, from the papacy John received unstinting support. Without it, his dynasty would not have survived.

(In 1207 Pope Innocent installed Stephen Langton as Archbishop of Canterbury over King John’s bitter objections. John refused to let Langton enter England and was excommunicated in 1208. Facing an invasion by the French and an uprising by his own nobles, John reconciled with the Church in 1213. The Church then ordered both the invasion and uprising to cease under threat of excommunication.)

Despite the great reverberations of John’s relationship with the church, and how it informs the political arena of the play, Shakespeare only winks at the idea that a churchman reputedly murdered John. Of Shakespeare’s probable main sources, he is closest to Holinshead (1577, 1587). Foxe in his 1563 Book of Martyrs, following the account given earlier by William Caxton (1480), plays up the poisoning of John by a Cistercian monk and only briefly gives the story that the king died from eating peaches and drinking new cider, one that Holinshead considered most accurate. This version of events is faithfully reproduced in the earlier Troublesome Reigne of King John, but Shakespeare takes a different tack. He very economically has Hubert explain to the Bastard that the king is dying and the circumstances behind this event:
The king I fear is poison’d by a monk

V. VI. 23

One who is,

A monk – I tell you – a resolved villain –

V. VI. 29

Shakespeare had already made his point about the meddling power of the Church, how dangerous it could be politically, and through Pandulph’s calling down of the interdiction before the gates of Angiers of the physical dangers in crossing it. Yet he had also shown how John had used the Church to consolidate control for himself and heirs over England. Shakespeare, consistent with his sources, and true to the compression of events he demonstrates throughout the play, he moves on to the passing of the king and the moral at the end of the piece, when the Bastard says:

Nought shall make us rue
If England to itself do rest but true.
(V. VII. 117-118)

At the conclusion of King John, his son Prince Henry becomes the new king, supported by the Bastard and the newly reconciled 3rd Earl of Salisbury and other nobles. The French Dolphin’s invasion, waning, has made a peace agreement with the Pope’s Legate Pandulph. We see that the Bastard and Salisbury, implicitly supported by the Church, will guide the young king into a reign over a secure and prosperous realm. Even though the French territories have been lost, England has its first true English king, born and raised in England. Only now will England begin forging her national identity.

While Shakespeare’s King John highlighted John’s struggle with the rapacious Catholic Church in the same way as many other Tudor authors, he also pointed out that while John lost his inheritance in France, and in died beset by troubles, he nonetheless succeeded in uniting his successors, guaranteeing a national identity. In King John, it seems as if religion is merely a means to an end.

Shakespeare skillfully reworked the well known story of a Medieval English king (who historically, was more French than English), intentionally reviled and defamed by the Medieval Catholic Church and as a direct result of its influence, posterity, only centuries later rehabilitated by Tudor era writers. By compressing the actual historical course of events, Shakespeare provided a rather sophisticated look at what makes a legitimate ruler, and how much power the Church should have in temporal affairs. His King John questioned as a usurper in the early part of the play, becomes legitimate by outwitting both the Church and his rebellious lords, to save England from both external and internal forces, setting in motion the rise of the legitimate sovereignty of the
English people. In the eyes of his Tudor audience, Shakespeare’s John, despite his character flaws, could be seen nonetheless as a worthy English king.
Reference


シェイクスピアの中世歴史劇『ジョン王』における歴史性と宗教性

マイケル・ランドルフ*

『ジョン王』は、シェイクスピアの正典の中で四部作のシリーズものに属さない二本の「歴史」劇のうちの一本であるが、長い間、批評家達があまり興味や議論の対象としてこなかった芝居である。ジョン王伝は、伝統的に評判の悪い中世のイングランド王に関する歴史記述に基づいている。そして、その伝説は、エリザベス朝時代には、チューダー王朝とカトリックおよびローマ教会に確執があったことから、話題性が高まっていた。フォックスの『殉教者の書』、ホリンシュッドの『年代記』、ベイルの『ジョン王』、そして、作者不詳の『ジョン王の乱世時代』は、皆、増大しつつあるカトリック教会の勢力に対するジョンの抵抗を描いている。シェイクスピアによるジョン王の描写は、この王の物語に内在する歴史的・宗教的要素について、また、後の国家「イングランド」の形成にこの王が及ぼした重要な影響力について再考する興味深い視座を提示している。

キーワード：ジョン王、私生児、篡奪、宗教的、正統／嫡出

* 人間科学総合研究所研究員・東洋大学生命科学部