

A Response to Roy Battenhouse, "Religion in *King John*: Shakespeare's View"

SANDRA BILLINGTON

This delicately argued article initially won my sympathy, even regarding the opposite conclusion to the one which I have myself argued for the ending of *King John*;¹ but it can be useful to rethink, and having done so, I find myself not, after all, in final agreement.

At the opening, though, it was interesting to read further examples of Shakespeare's King John behaving with less than royal integrity; as for example reverting from relief that Hubert had not after all murdered Arthur "to ordering the murder of another innocent [the prophet] Peter . . . only fifty lines later" (142). This, and John's blind rages, provide further evidence that Shakespeare deliberately portrayed John as unkingly; in contrast, as Battenhouse says, to the dignified attributes allowed John in the anonymous *Troublesome Raigne of King John*. Further, in the anonymous text, Queen Elinor has no lines undermining his right to the throne and, although in Part II John acknowledges he has been "faultie," the author appears to have had patriotic regard for the historical precursor to Henry VIII; whereas Shakespeare disregarded royal decorum, to present a flagrant travesty.

By contrast, Battenhouse argues, Shakespeare's Arthur is "the innocent boy . . . representative of genuine religious piety" (146), a quality which is kept alive through Hubert and finally revived in Henry II, who, with his accession, changes the quality of kingship to one of pure morality. But, one must ask, will the change be a practical improvement? Both Battenhouse and I have suggested parallels between the scene of Hubert and Arthur and the Mystery play texts of Abraham and Isaac. Yet I would argue that this similarity contributes to a different perspective in each play. While Mystery plays are ultimately concerned with religious piety, I would argue that Shakespeare's *King John* is not. It seems to me that the Prince Arthur

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

of the *TR* has a better combination of morality and kingly authority, and that Shakespeare's boy prince, though more sympathetic, is a less convincing model for leadership. Arthur's religious qualities, as Battenhouse says, reappear in Henry II, where they also promise to be equally impractical. In theatre, what we see and hear matters most, and the one moment the young King has to show his authority is not promising. His last lines—"I have a kind soul that would give thanks / And knows not how to do it but with tears"—suggest that he will be a holy man, and a weak king, similar to Shakespeare's portrayal of Henry VI.

I have to diverge similarly over the reading of Falconbridge's changed allegiance at the end of the play. At the death of John, he is initially resolved on revenge, and in Battenhouse's words, "but now he finds no one interested When he calls on the lords to follow him against the Dauphin, he is told that an honourable peace has already been arranged, in which he may *join with them*" (148). But is this peace honourable? What we in fact hear is that Archbishop Pandulph has been the intermediary. This inevitably brings to my mind the earlier scenes in the play where the Archbishop "bereft of any true religion" (Battenhouse 143) was a leading exponent of worldliness, rather than being the support of any ideal behaviour. In the political context of England striving for independence from Rome, the fact that Pandulph still has a role is retrograde, and is in contrast to the optimistic ending of the *TR*, where we see the young King Henry and the Dauphin in person negotiating honourable terms together. Also, in Shakespeare's play, Falconbridge's change of allegiance happens very quickly—Shakespeare provides him with language which specifically betrays one vow with another in the space of thirty lines—; therefore the impression I am left with is not so much that Falconbridge "is put in his place as a subordinate in the new regime and given his cue to join in homage to young Henry" (148), but that his reaction to this continues the devaluation, or lack of understanding, which we have seen throughout the play, of such courtly concepts as fidelity.

The perception that Hubert brings restorative news to all he comes into contact with in the second half of the play is interesting, and the connection suggested between him and the dead Arthur convincing;

but finally, because the conclusion of the play is political, not religious, I still find the paradoxes which Shakespeare leaves us with over the likely outcome of Henry II's accession the more immediate and dramatic.

As one who is persuaded by the evidence for the *TR* preceding *KJ*, I also feel more secure with Harbage's dating of 1588 for the earlier play, deduced from the post-Armada sentiment in it, rather than the 1591 offered by Battenhouse, and which is perhaps a means of remaining outside the controversy. But it is good to see John himself considered as something more than a failed creation on Shakespeare's part; from Roy Battenhouse's perspective here one is encouraged to see John's weaknesses as a part of the character, rather than of the characterization.

University of Glasgow

NOTE

¹See *Connotations* 1.2 (1991) 140-49 and my own *Mock Kings in Medieval Society and Renaissance Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1991), chapter 5.