

On *King John*: An Answer to Billington and Hobson*

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I am grateful for the measurable support of my interpretation of *King John* in the responses offered by Sandra Billington and Christopher Hobson. Both these colleagues bring scholarly equipment to their evaluations. Billington's book on mock kings in drama devotes part of a chapter to *King John*, and Hobson is the author of a long article that examined as a key to the play the Bastard's speech on Commodity. Kingly misrule in a world of politics biased by a devotion to self-advantage is indeed central in this play, and Billington is able to bring to it an Erasmian perspective on the folly of kings, while Hobson specifies commodity-seeking as the folly that structures John's actions and those of other panders of the times. Shakespeare is portraying in John, in Billington's view, a usurper-king of hollow virtue, and Hobson goes further to view the whole era as dominated by various oath-breakers and the swirl of disorder they cause. My own perspective agrees with those assessments but includes another dimension by calling attention to a factor of beneficial providence appearing initially in the person of the boy Arthur and continued in his convert Hubert and reinforced by Hubert's admirer the French Lord Melun—the ultimate result of which is the replacing of commodity-seeking with a peace based on a general return to "old right." In other words, I would contend that the play as a whole rests on a Christian view of history, which understands earthly disorder as a phenomenon caused by human cupidity, a biasing of ethical conduct which in the long run fails historically and can be superseded

*Reference: Roy Battenhouse, "Religion in *King John*: Shakespeare's View," *Connotations* 1.2 (1991): 140-49; Sandra Billington, "A Response to Roy Battenhouse, 'Religion...'," *Connotations* 1.3 (1991): 290-92; Christopher Z. Hobson, "A Response to Roy Battenhouse, 'Religion...'," *Connotations* 2.1 (1992): 69-75.

by the conversion of its advocates to a policy of mutual reconciliation. Regarding such a framework of providential meaning, Billington's response is to raise some objections, while Hobson feels that I have been "vague" in expounding the play's ending and asks me to clarify. I shall now answer with a full explanation.

Let me begin by speaking to Hobson's position, since his interpretation of the Bastard's words that end the play seems to me nearly adequate, and my essay neglected to expound their meaning. Hobson argues that the line, "If England to itself do rest but true" (5.5.118) carries a dual reference both to the nation and "to the person of the monarch," thus implicating John in England's wounding of itself. The conspicuous "if," he says, implies a moral criticism of the monarch as well as of the rebel nobles. Hobson at least verges on saying that the Bastard is voicing a commitment of obedience not absolutely to the monarch (the doctrine typical of the Tudor homilies) but rather to the true welfare of England, to which everyone is bound. I accept this interpretation, and would note further that it involves in the Bastard a significant adjustment of his earlier stated desire to commit his energies (and England's) to serving John by pursuing revenge against the Dauphin. That had been the Bastard's version of "mended faiths" in line 75, before he discovered that this mode of patriotism has been replaced by a better, the peace being arranged by the returned rebels under the aegis of John's son, the young Henry III.

As I argued in my essay, the new leaders deflate the Bastard's "braves" and give him the cue to join them. At their invitation he abandons his earlier pretensions to leadership as John's servant and submits to the "sweet self" of young Henry. His stated wish that the new monarch may devote himself to "the lineal state and glory of the land" envisions a kingship that is surely no longer one of "wrested pomp" (the phrase he had used to characterize John's kingship in 4.3.154). And there is an evident analogy between the sweet boy-king and the innocent Arthur, whom the Bastard had referred to as "the life, the right, and truth" of England's realm (4.3.144). Must we not infer therefore that the Bastard himself has now "come home"—to a patriotism that obeys "old right"? We have seen obedience reconstituted by the action of the nobles in bringing to the dying John his morally untarnished son to "set a form

upon that indigest / Which [John] hath left so shapeless and so rude" (5.7.26-27). It is to such a kingship that they have "come home"; and the Bastard along with them becomes a returned prodigal when he phrases the meaning of "mended faiths" in terms of a traditional platitude regarding obedience to England's true self. Like others in the play who have been rashly voluntary servants of fashionable versions of honor, the Bastard ends up a convert to true conscience.

To understand this conversion we must recall that the Bastard has always been aware of the difference between honors of "face" and legitimate honor. Early in the play, when he consented to be knighted "Sir Richard and Plantagenet," he knew he was abandoning "country" manners for the "new-made honor" of "worshipful society" and in this respect he was being "a bastard to the times"; but he excused this devil-may-care decision as a way of mocking the fashionable practices of his courtly associates and at the same time promoting his own "rising" amid a society of moral bastards. In 2.1. when John boasts in witness of his kingship thousands of "hearts of English breed," the Bastard comments: "Bastards, and else" (line 276). A bit later, he speaks satirically of the "glory" of the slaughter achieved by "the rich blood of kings . . . set on fire" (line 350). Then in his soliloquy ending Act 2 he draws a clear distinction between the "armor conscience" worn by Philip of France when "zeal and charity" brought him to the field as God's soldier and the break-vow version of this practised by Philip when a vile-drawing bias of "tickling commodity" misled him by his outward eye's self-interest. In this soliloquy a conscientious denunciation of commodity-serving prefaces the Bastard's argument that his own worship of self-advantage is justified by the practices of kings. Hobson has well observed (in his essay in *Shakespeare Yearbook*) that the speech as a whole combines satire of false kingship with a self-exposure of the Bastard's own willingness to imitate it, and thus constitutes "a double-edged exposure of unprincipled action and the fallacious reasoning used to justify it" (96). The sophistry of the conclusion, Hobson has pointed out, results from a syllogistic reasoning that rests on an implied major premise that is no true universal but only a "seeming" one derived from an array of instances; but such wayward reasoning aptly defines a logic of action that develops in the play's major characters—while its fallacious major

premise leaves room for the later devaluation of it (though “evolution” is here Hobson’s ambiguous term) by events in the plot (106).

The fallacious logic can be seen, for instance, in the action of the rebel lords. They denounce John’s abandoning of conscience while at the same time they employ sophistic argument to justify a swallowing of their own scruples to serve a questionable version of “right.” The internal contradiction is evident when Salisbury tells the Dauphin:

. . . believe me, Prince,
I am not glad that such a sore of time
Should seek a plaster by contemn’d revolt
And heal the inveterate canker of one wound
By making many. (5.2.11-15)

We notice here that Salisbury (in this respect like the Bastard) cites the condition of the times as his excuse. The point is then emphasized:

But such is the infection of the time
That for the health and physic of our right
We cannot deal but with the very hand
Of stern injustice and confused wrong. (20-23)

Injustice is thus justified in the name of “our right,” which must use “wrong” in its service. The lurking inconsistency, however, creates a psychological anxiety—similar (let me suggest) to the classic case of the Pharisee Saul whose bravado in pursuing a supposed righteousness was a kicking “against the prick” of God’s truth; and similar to Augustine’s pre-conversion experience of being enbondaged by “two wills” in conflict within him until a child’s voice relieved the burden. We are not really surprised to hear Salisbury say, later, that he “loves” the message Melun gives him, since now he can un-tread his false steps and leave “our irregular” course (5.4.49-54). A parallel to this, it seems to me, is the change in the Bastard’s psychology from its warring tension at the end of Act 4, where he confesses to a feeling of losing his way “amid the thorns and dangers of this world” while yet determined to support John’s “business,” and the relief from this at the end of Act 5 when the returned lords point him to a new child-sponsored center of obedience.

Melun's confession is an evident instance of a break with the agenda of the Dauphin; and surely no reader can doubt that this act of political resistance to a monarch has Shakespeare's approval. Hence the play, as a whole, cannot be said to support a Tudor doctrine of unconditional obedience. Indeed, that was made evident in 4.1., where Hubert was moved by Arthur to resist John's agenda, and we were invited to admire Hubert's decision to undergo "much danger" for Arthur's sake. The link between this decision and Melun's later one is the motive of "love" that inspires both. Hubert was converted by Arthur's spirit of unconditional charity; Melun has his conscience awakened, he tells us, by "the love of Hubert," along with a remembering of blood-kinship with England through Melun's grandfather. A normative allegiance revives in Melun when death poses for him the need to choose something more lasting than commodity can offer:

Why should I then be false, since it is true
That I must die here and live hence by truth? (5.4.28-29)

The collapse of any gain to be had from devilry, we may say, furnished the negative factor while grace and nature together provided the positive factor in his homecoming to truth. Obedience to this truth he now realizes is a human being's only lasting stay and true ground of welfare.

I believe that this is also the Bastard's realization when he finds cut off any gain from his adhering to the "bias of the world" and discovers alongside this the grace of a better good offered through the "news" the converted nobles provide him. His service of John's "spirit" has failed to bring him any lasting benefit, whereas young Henry promises a good whose potential lives in the child's humility, worthy of being served "everlastingly" (5.7.105). A reader should recall, in this connection, the conclusion of Shakespeare's Sonnet 124, where the poet advocates a forsaking of "Policy, that heretic" who invites service to the fashions of Time and "short-numbered hours" and instead declares his determination to build on a "goodness" that stands "hugely politic." The renunciation in that sonnet of a "bastard" love seems to me exemplified in the concluding lines of *King John*. Those lines advocate a loyalty that is no longer a worship of devilish gain but is now

committed to a worship of truth, the “hugely politic” Good that gains life for everyman. The machiavellian impulse was a prodigal phase, which all its practitioners have discovered to be empty of real good, prompting them to “come home” to the “love” represented in Hubert and Melun and Henry III. Expediency has been redefined.

I would hope that my fuller exposition may persuade Sandra Billington to withdraw the objection she raises in her response to my earlier essay. She grants my point that Arthur’s religious qualities “reappear” in young Henry, but then she comments that these qualities promise to be “equally impractical” in the new king. She feels that his last lines—“I have a kind soul that would give thanks / And knows not how to do it but with tears” suggests he will be a “holy” man but a weak king. I would reply that Elizabethans such as Edmund Spenser regarded holiness as the first and principal virtue of a public servant, and that the point of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 124 is that only a holy love can be practical in a lasting way. I would concede, of course, that perseverance in a holy love is not automatic: the Bible itself tells us that the love and faith of the young Isaac which converted his father Abraham underwent a lapse in old age when his eyes grew dim, making necessary then a practical intervention by his wise wife Rebecca. By analogy, young Henry’s “kind soul” might lapse in the future from its present thankfulness and pity. But since Billington grants that Arthur’s virtues parallel those of the young Isaac in *Mystery* play drama, I must question her proceeding to argue that Shakespeare’s *King John* is not “ultimately concerned with religious piety” (“Response” 290). How can this be so when the religious piety of Arthur, Hubert, and Melun bring about the play’s happy conclusion? Billington is perhaps under the influence of a 20th-century universal skepticism which doubts the value of all religious piety and supposes it irrelevant to secular life. I cannot agree with Billington’s judgement that “the Prince Arthur of the *TR* has a better combination of morality and kingly authority than Shakespeare’s boy price.” The morality of the *TR* Arthur rests not on appeal to Hubert’s love but (Puritanwise) on warning Hubert that “all the plagues of hell” will befall him if he commits murder. And kingly authority is exhibited by telling John to his face, “I am King / Of England though thou wear the diadem,” thus provoking John to order death for him. This Arthur has

a boldness of rhetoric, not the Christian meekness of Shakespeare's Arthur (which Billington apparently equates with moral weakness). Recall St Paul's adage that his "power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9).

Billington would also question whether the peace at the end of the play is "honorable." She regards it as "retrograde" since its intermediary is Pandulph, whose earlier behavior I described as "bereft of any true religion." Perhaps I should have stated more plainly that the providential events which change the play's other commodity servers change Pandulph also. The presumptuous dictator who boasted to John that "My tongue shall hush again the storm of war" (5.1.20) has discovered subsequently that his tongue was powerless, whereas what has made a peace possible is the Dauphin's loss on the sands of all his ships concurrent with the Bastard's loss of John's troops in the Lincoln Washes—a double washout, followed by the double conversion to "old right" by the French Melun and the English nobles. Thus Pandulph is reduced to doing what he refused to do in Act 3, namely, act as a "reverend father" committed to devising "some gentle order" whereby both kings might join in a "blessed" friendship (3.1.250). A mediating role is appropriate, since it accords with orthodox doctrine (going back to the 5th-century Pope Gelasius) that church and state are ordained to aid each other as mutually interdependent authorities. Pandulph's behavior when cursing John, if measured by the norm of Arthur's piety, can be seen as a defective version of piety, since it countered John's impiety with a legalism equally pretentious and evasive of Christ's command of charitable love—while at the same time it ignored the widow Constance and the orphan Arthur, thus controverting true religion as defined in James 1:27. Pandulph's distorted logic, we may say, was like John's and like the Bastard's in choosing to fight "fire with fire," while himself lacking any mystical fire of a holy spirit. But when his breath (unlike Arthur's) proved to be ultimately impotent, a deflated Pandulph is brought home to a humble role by providential events outside his power.

Divine Providence, according to Augustine, is a mysterious order of justice that includes chance events within a larger design. In *King John* we see the Bastard aware of such an order when he interprets the

tempest of war as Heaven's frowning upon the land (4.3.159). Similarly, he interprets as a divine judgment his loss of troops in the Washes, exclaiming, "Withhold thine indignation, mighty heaven, / And tempt us not to bear above our power." The temptation in the Bastard's case was to exploit his "Sir Richard" title into a bid for Hubert's political allegiance, but Hubert (because converted to charity by Arthur) nips in the bud this bastard ambition. Perhaps Hubert remembers the blame he got from John for countenancing temptation:

Hads't thou but shook thy head or made a pause
 When I spake darkly what I purposed,
 Or turned an eye of doubt upon my face . . .
 Deep shame had struck me dumb, made me
 break off. (4.2.31-35)

Those very lines are evidence that temporal gain from a superior's sin should be resisted and *not* obeyed. "Thou," John had complained, "made it no conscience to betray a prince" in order to be "endeared to a king." Hubert cannot have forgot that lesson providentially taught him by an unhappy sinner. So Hubert providentially curbs the inclination of his benefactor, the Bastard, and points him to the example of revised obedience arrived at by the repentant nobles, who will later complete the Bastard's conversion by the good turn they invite him to.

Sandra Billington fails to see any conversions because she reads every change of allegiance as an instance of faith-breaking. In her view Faulconbridge "betrays one vow with another in the space of thirty lines" at the play's end and thus "continues the devaluation" of fidelity which we have seen throughout the play ("Response" 291). In *Mock Kings*, similarly, she speaks of "no significant" improvement with the accession of Henry, saying further:

Although the Bastard understands the need to keep faith with England's political destiny:

Nought shall make us rue
 If England to itself do rest but true (5.7.117-18)

a doubt remains as to whether he or anyone in the court understands what that means in terms of personal commitment. This makes the Shakespearean text rather more challenging and dissenting than one might expect. It would appear that the young playwright held some radical views . . . (134)

Hobson is less negative regarding the Bastard's final speech. One way of reading it, he says (in *Shakespeare Yearbook* 107-08) is as an "embrace of expediency that is then covered up (for the audience as well as the characters) by truisms"; however, these truisms "can be" understood as directed as much against royal misconduct as against rebellion" and thus "should remind" the audience of John's culpability. Hobson's two-sided reading is the result of his attempt to view the whole play as satire—a logical outworking of the Bastard's double-sided satire of kings and of himself in his Commodity speech. Like Billington, Hobson (in his "Comment" 4) terms "unconvincing" my account of providential events in the play—although (unlike Billington) he leaves the door open by inviting me to discuss this matter more fully, since he senses that the thrust of my essay supports his own hypothesis that the play suggests "a conditional moral basis for obedience" by linking obedience to just rule. I'm now explaining that the play does this, not simply by warning us against the misconduct of John and the rebels alike, but by showing us (among other things) several eventual conversions from misconduct to beneficial conduct. The Bastard's final truisms are not a "covering up" of a continuing worship of Commodity on his part or by the nobles; they need to be seen rather as a covering over with mortification of a mistaken and false worship that is now ended. Replacing this is a "just" worship of Truth—the kind witnessed to by the conscience of Melun in his declaration, "I must . . . live hence by truth." That message, rather than simply Melun's news of the Dauphin's perfidy, awaked the nobles to return to traditional "old right" (not identical with "unconditional" obedience but rather conditioned by a just love of England's welfare). And I would say further that Melun's message amounts to a renewal of Arthur's freedom from love of Commodity—described somewhat imprecisely by Hobson's reference to Arthur's "sacrifice" as restoring dynastic legitimacy (4).

Tillyard viewed the scene of Arthur's pleading as merely "an exhibition of rhetoric" and complained that it "does not fit naturally into the play at all" (232). Further, his general judgment was that "Shakespeare huddles together and fails to motivate properly the events of the last third of his play" (215). Chakravorty replied that what Tillyard read as unmotivated huddling is actually Shakespeare's telescoping of events to produce evidence of Time's judgment on King John: the dramatist has motivated the end in his own moral way by connecting it with Heaven's revenge on "unreprievable condemned blood" (73, 78). I would extend this contention by saying that heaven's revenge includes visiting with mortification not only the person of John but also the ambitions of all the other Commodity-lovers in the play. The put-down of these, however, is accompanied by a grace manifested in Melun that rectifies their consciences and returns them to true obedience. My emphasis therefore is on a tracing of this grace back to the child Arthur and his convert Hubert. Christianity teaches that saving truth is revealed in time, and a classical adage tells us that truth is the daughter of time. Shakespeare mirrors this in his dramatizing of history.

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