

A Comment on Roy Battenhouse, "Religion in *King John*: Shakespeare's View"

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For many years, Roy Battenhouse's interpretive focus on Christian topics and typologies in Shakespeare has served as a counterweight to the emphasis of much standard criticism, old and new, on Shakespeare's acceptance of absolutist values. Thus, in a period when Tillyard's and Dover Wilson's readings of the Lancastrian cycle still held sway, Battenhouse's study of "Falstaff as Parodist and Perhaps Holy Fool" helped undermine the "good rule vs. misrule" orthodoxy about those plays. Battenhouse's current study of *King John* implicitly challenges both still-influential Tillyardian readings and more fashionable New Historicist interpretations of the play, though he mentions neither.

King John poses the problem of obedience in a situation in which disputed royal claims and the king's own weakness and wickedness put the sacral basis of authority in doubt. Tillyard's reading in *Shakespeare's History Plays* argued the problem away, contending that the issue of loyalty is never seriously in doubt because John, unlike Richard III, is not utterly wicked (225-26). Readings influenced by Tillyard, such as that of E. A. J. Honigmann in his introduction to the Arden text (which I take to be influential because of the semi-canonic character of these texts), have gone beyond this facile view yet still assume that despite his questionable actions, John is the hero of his own play (lxviii-lxxiii). New Historicist critics view the play much more as an exposure, arguing that it puts on view, particularly in the Bastard, a machiavellism that is either cynically affirmed (Manheim 122) or barely

*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.

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“contained” by an endorsement of “the lesson of the Tudor homilies” in the final scene (Vaughan 73). All these views, though disparate, share the assumption that Shakespeare accepts the power of the state, understood as royal power, as a final good. Roy Battenhouse argues, instead, that Shakespeare questions royal power in the name of a higher morality.

Battenhouse’s entry into the text is through a comparison of the handling of religious issues in *King John* and *Troublesome Reign*. He is right to point to a more even-handed treatment of John’s confrontations with the papal emissary Pandulph, and to draw the conclusion that “each is shown to be a counterfeiter of religious duty” (140). In Pandulph’s case the main demonstration of the falseness of religious duty is Pandulph’s long speech (3.1.189-223) arguing for French King Philip to break the peace he has just made with John, an exercise in casuistry that uses a flawed major premise (Philip’s first vow is to champion the church) to support an ethically unacceptable conclusion (Philip should break his word to John).¹ As Battenhouse notes, this ignores “Philip’s baptismal vow to serve Christ” (145); from another standpoint Pandulph’s premise equivocates among several possible meanings of serving the church. In John’s case, the demonstration of religious insincerity is more circuitous, and I am not sure that Battenhouse does full justice to it. John gains stature when he defies Pandulph on nationalist grounds (3.1). Battenhouse’s argument is that this portrait of John as proto-Protestant, based on Foxe, is undercut by subtleties of tone and juxtaposition: “Shakespeare’s John is noticeably more boastful and scoffing” than his counterpart in *Troublesome Reign*, and his claim of needing “no assistance of [Pandulph’s] mortal hand” (3.1.84) is vitiated by his deals for political advantage with Philip and others (Battenhouse 141-42). Yet John’s braggadochio could have struck audiences positively, and the comparison of his claims to independence with his deal-making is a relatively subtle irony. The most forceful undercutting of John’s claims comes not with these nuances but with John’s submission to Pandulph in Act 5, which Battenhouse mentions but does not stress. Here, if anywhere, the defiance of Act 3 is shown retrospectively to have been based on political advantage rather than principle.

Nevertheless, Battenhouse's basic point that John and Pandulph are shown as equally false in their use of religious claims—in contrast to the more conventionally Protestant treatment in *Troublesome Reign*—is correct. Indeed, Battenhouse could have emphasized more than he does the pervasively false use of religious claims in the play. One of the notable features of *King John* is the swearing of oaths that are later dishonored (e.g., the oaths of Philip, Lewis, etc., to support Prince Arthur against John). I had not realized, before reviewing the text with Battenhouse's thesis in mind, how often these oaths stress their "holy" and "religious" character: Philip's protection of Arthur is "divinely vow'd" and "religiously provoke[d]"; later, Salisbury's intention to avenge Arthur is sworn by "a vow, a holy vow," which Pembroke and Bigot "religiously confirm" (2.1.237, 246; 4.3.67, 83). Every one of these "holy" vows is broken. Not simply John and Pandulph's respective claims as defenders of their faiths, but the entire practice of religious avowal is systematically devalued as it is shown to spring from momentary political advantage.

This treatment, in turn, is consonant with the largest intellectual issue in the play, the degree to which royal authority is derived ultimately from God, a commonplace found in the homilies and even in a relatively liberal thinker like Richard Hooker.² Battenhouse, in referring to John's "borrow'd majesty" (141), endorses the idea that John's title is usurped, as does Sandra Billington in her comment on his article (290). The Bastard echoes this claim, both in referring to the French campaign in Arthur's behalf as "honourable" (2.1.585), and in his subsequent (and much-debated) reference to the dead Arthur as embodying "The life, the right and truth of all this realm" (4.3.144). Nonetheless, "borrow'd majesty" is a *French* charge against John (1.1.4), not neutral background information. The legitimacy of John's title is *in doubt*, and, as Sigurd Burckhardt first pointed out nearly thirty years ago, the play presents a test of standard ways of resolving such questionable claims, and finds them wanting.³ The confrontation of John, Philip, and the Citizen before Angiers, in which the latter (Hubert in some editions) thrice pledges fealty to "The king of England, when we know the king" (2.1.363; similar statements at 270-71, 331-33), wittily satirizes the commonplace that the

true king should be recognizable by his bearing; the subsequent indecisive armed clash disproves the convention that disputed claims can be resolved through a trial by combat in which God's favor determines the victor. The ensuing deal between John and Philip, itself canceled by the arrival of Pandulph, implicitly acknowledges that sacral claims to kingship are either empty or, at best, unknowable.

Burckhardt's claim was that in *King John* Shakespeare questions the idea that secular rule is religiously based. Battenhouse implicitly distances himself from this claim by arguing that a religious basis for kingship is reintroduced into the play through its "providential" ending (140, 145, 148). By this he apparently refers both to the unforeseeable events that check the ambitions of Lewis and the Bastard, and to the deathbed confession of Count Melun, which restores the loyalty of the English nobles. These combine to support the rallying of all English forces around the child Henry III on the basis of loyalty to "old right" (5.4.61). Battenhouse's argument here is both vague—I hope I have distilled his thesis correctly—and unconvincing. He is at his best in arguing that Arthur represents a model of holiness;⁴ it is less easy to show that Arthur's sacrifice is what effectively restores dynastic legitimacy. Battenhouse does not examine the point that the nobles' loyalty is restored only when they learn that Lewis means to betray them. He intriguingly proposes, in effect, a kind of spiritualized version of the "king's touch," in that Arthur's holiness softens Hubert, while in turn Melun cites love for Hubert as one reason for his confession (147)—but Melun's English grandfather is an equally potent reason (5.4.42). (It could be argued that Melun's two references point to the two *emotional values*—Christian humility and English patriotism—that the play counterposes to dynastic intrigue. But Battenhouse needs to discuss the point.)

More importantly, the presumptively providential events provide no answer to the serious dilemmas of obedience that the play has raised; a play that argued that such events will always intervene to resolve questions of loyalty would be intellectually trivial. Finally, in citing the nobles' affirmation of "old right" (presumably meaning both their former loyalty to England instead of France, and their traditional relationship of fealty to the monarch), Battenhouse does not sufficiently distinguish

his analysis from those that see the ending of the play as a belated endorsement of "the Tudor homilies" (Vaughan). If the play's crazy-quilt plot means anything, it is that a king who first signs away English claims (2.1), then defends royal prerogatives against the pope (3.1) only to squander his subjects' loyalty through his wickedness (3.2-3, 4.2) and his submission to the pope (5.1), may still be defended in preference to engaging in civil war (4.6). To sustain such an argument requires either appealing to the absolute duty of obedience (as Tillyard assumed Shakespeare did, and as Vaughan argues that he did as a kind of unconvincing closure), or endorsing a machiavellist conception of state-effectiveness (as argued by Manheim, and in part M. M. Reese [285]), or, finally, it requires suggesting a third standard that provides a conditional moral basis for obedience. I have argued elsewhere that a third standard is found in the final scene, and particularly in the final speech.⁵ Neither Battenhouse nor Sandra Billington, in her comment, gives this speech the attention it deserves. The Bastard's closing lines,

. . . Nought shall make us rue
If England to itself do rest but true! (5.5.117-18)

at first glance seem merely a conventional warning against rebellion. But while they do contain such a warning, the standard trope by which "England" refers both to the nation and to the person of the monarch allows these lines to work also as a warning against the type of royal misconduct that John has so flagrantly displayed. Such a reading is underlined by the number of times previously in the play that the conventional trope has been used (e.g., 1.1.1, 20, and 24, referring to France; 2.1.201-203; 4.3.142-43).⁶ The danger of royal misconduct is also stressed when Salisbury, pledging fealty to Henry, tells him that he is "born / To set a form upon that indigest / Which he [John] hath left so shapeless and so rude" (5.7.25-27). In this light the Bastard's warning that "England" shall never be conquered "But when it first did help to wound itself" (112-14) can be read as a complex statement referring to the royal conduct that causes rebellion as well as to the rebellion itself. This is not an endorsement of rebellion; rather it is a moral criticism that links obedience to just rule.

The view of King John suggested here is consonant with the argument of Annabel Patterson that in *Coriolanus* and elsewhere Shakespeare works toward a social model in which the interests of different classes and the crown are “negotiated” (Patterson 141-46 and *passim*). It is fascinating that a relatively early play like *King John* presents a similar conception even if in less complex form. Roy Battenhouse’s discussion has helped us to see that the issue of religion in *King John* is more nuanced than standard treatments allow—that Shakespeare takes an independent and critical attitude toward religious justifications for royal conduct and at the same time uses religious typologies (through the character of Arthur) to criticize his royal characters. I disagree with Battenhouse’s treatment of the restoration of authority at the end of the play, since I see it as a plea for mutual responsibility of monarch and subject, rather than a simple reaffirmation of “old right.” But this difference is not, after all, nearly as large as the difference that separates both Battenhouse and myself from Tillyardist and New Historicist conceptions of Shakespeare as an apologist for absolutism.

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NOTES

¹The speech is analyzed in the classic treatment of Shakespeare’s rhetoric, Joseph, *Shakespeare’s Use of the Arts of Language* 184-85.

²See the “Exhortation concerning good Ordre and Obedience,” as cited by Tillyard 65-66, and Hooker, *Ecclesiastical Polity* VIII, 3.1-2.

³See Burckhardt, esp. 125-31.

⁴Here he picks up a suggestion in his *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1969) 407n.

⁵See my “Bastard Speech: The Rhetoric of ‘Commodity’ in *King John*” 107-109. A view similar to mine has been advanced by David Womersley, but he bases it on the Bastard’s character development and accepts the orthodoxy of the final speech (497 and *passim*).

⁶The Arden note on 2.1.201-203 comments that “this quibble on the identity of king and country . . . drives home the moral of the history” (Arden edn., 32n). Just so. Such a double reading of countries’ names was, of course, part of standard Elizabethan usage and would scarcely need to be established in audiences’ minds.

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