

## John Bale's *Kynge Johan* as English Nationalist Propaganda

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*John Bale is generally associated with the English Reformation rather than the Tudor government. It may be that Bale's well-known protestant polemics tend to overshadow his place in Thomas Cromwell's propaganda machine, and that Bale's *Kynge Johan* is more a propaganda piece for the Tudor monarchy than it is just another of his Protestant dramas.*

### Introduction

On 2 January, 1539, a “petie and nawghtely don enterlude,” that “put down the Pope and Saincte Thomas” was presented at Canterbury.<sup>1</sup> Beyond the fact that a four hundred sixty-one year old play from Tudor England remains extant in any form, this particular “enterlude,” John Bale’s play *Kynge Johan*,<sup>2</sup> remains of particular interest to scholars for some see *Johan* as meriting “a particular place in the history of the theatre. It is the half open chrysalis, the morality-play whence the historical drama is about to emerge.”<sup>3</sup> In a similar manner, Honor McCusker calls the play a “landmark in the development of the English drama for students who will never be interested in his [Bale’s] other achievements.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, *Johan* deserves attention because it is the earliest English history or chronicle play. Beyond that, *Johan* is generally seen as representing an early attempt at Protestant propaganda. In this vein, scholars such as Jesse Harris present Bale as a “dramatist of the new learning”

1 Cramner, *Writings and Disputations*, 388.

2 Adams, Cox, and McCusker all agree that this “enterlude” was most likely Bale’s play *Kynge Johan*, however, we lack evidence to prove the issue either way.

3 Emile Lugouis, quoted in Harris, *John Bale*, 91.

4 McKlusker, *John Bale*, 72.

and part of the propaganda machine Thomas Cromwell was using to push the English church closer to the reformed churches on the Continent.<sup>5</sup>

While none of these arguments is mutually exclusive, they tend to overlook the fact that Bale's original intentions may have been more attuned to Henry VIII's desires to aggrandize the monarchy than a play designed purely as protestant propaganda. Whether this was Bale's original intent probably never will be known definitively; however, it is probable that elements scholars identify as blatant protestant propaganda may well have been attached to the script at a later date. We know that Bale revised *Kynge Johan* several times between 1539 and the reign of Elizabeth.

Scholars generally associate "Bilious" Bale with the English Reformation, rather than the Tudor government. He is seen as zealous reformer rather than political hack—yet he may have been both. The process of his conversion from Carmelite monk to full-blown protestant revolutionary remains unclear, but because of his later protestant polemics, historians may have underestimated Bale's importance in Cromwell's political propaganda machine. Jesse Harris notes that: "In order to popularize his own policies and discredit those of the opposition, Cromwell adapted various propagandistic devices to suit his purposes. Makers of propaganda were employed by him to slander the Pope and the Catholic Church,"<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, Harris, like many other historians discussing Bale, makes the mistake of lumping Cromwell's policies fostering the royal supremacy together with the aims of religious reformers. Therefore, Harris and others discuss *Kynge Johan* as Protestant propaganda, overlooking the fact that the play focuses more on the dangers of an international episcopate and the need for royal supremacy than on religious reform *per se*.

In terms of the play, Honor McCusker calls *Kynge Johan* "an interesting political document as well as a morality: and notes:

5 Harris, *John Bale*, 24.

6 Harris, *John Bale*, 27.

That Bale thought of it as an instrument of propaganda, and that he had very precise views to set forth, is indicated by the fact that the end of the play he borrows several pages from William Tynsdale's *Obedience of a Christian Man*, and puts them, in versified form into the mouth of Veritas.<sup>7</sup>

The question is what kind of propaganda? If examined in the light of both Bale and Cromwell, of author and Crown, the play becomes a very pragmatic step in a period of very pragmatic religious beliefs—along the path of Bale's conversion. If Bale was truly a scholar and antiquarian as well as a reformer, *Kynge Johan* can be read as Tudor propaganda written by a man on the path to conversion. Through placing both Bale and *Kynge Johan* within the historical context of the reign of Henry VIII, especially as he sought means to annul his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, I suggest that *Kynge Johan* was Bale's attempt on, at the behest of Thomas Cromwell, then Lord of the Privy Seal and "the indisputable technician of the English Reformation,"<sup>8</sup> to use a play loosely based on the reign of John Lackland as deliberate propaganda for the necessity of an English church governed by an English king to replace an international church ruled by an Italian pope. The play's importance as a piece of Protestant propaganda came later when Bale revised the original. Further, I believe that the relationship that existed between Cromwell and John Bale is more significant than scholars credit.

### **Tudor Literature as Propaganda**

The concept of Tudor era literature as deliberate propaganda has been thoroughly explored both in terms of its use to promote a sort of early English nationalism and to promote the Tudor Dynasty. Honor McCusker goes so far as to state that "It has even been suggested that the interest in Arthurian literature evidenced by Leland's *Assertio inclytissimi Arturij Regis Britanniae* (1544) and other works was fostered by the crown for political reasons. McCusker writes:

7 McClusker, *John Bale*, 92.

8 Smith, *Mask of Royalty*, 127.

Antiquarian research received official approval as early as 1533, when Henry VIII appointed John Leland King's Antiquary. Anything that would strengthen national unity was valuable at this critical point, and the Tudor house had its own motives for establishing itself as true successor to the British kings."<sup>9</sup>

By 1536 men whom Jesse Harris has labeled as, "makers of propaganda" (including publishers such as John Rastell) were printing propaganda *en masse*. Allistair Fox notes that "one striking phenomenon about early Tudor literature is that it was almost invariably concerned with politics, either directly or indirectly, and that this political bearing had a major impact on the nature of the literary forms."<sup>10</sup> Granted, much of the political maneuvering in Tudor England dealt with the Church, however it must be remembered that the Henrician reformation was more of a reform of the command structure of the church than of doctrine and practice. Its primary purpose was to replace the Pope as head of the English Church with Henry VIII. Such an endeavor is a political exercise rather than a spiritual one, and the nature of the propaganda generated therein was political despite being clothed as religious.

### ***Kynge Johan: The Text***

Like all of Bale's dramatic works, *Kynge Johan* was most likely written sometime between 1533 and his arrest in 1537. It is one of only five of his extant plays.<sup>11</sup> *Kynge Johan* is the also only extant play of Bale's in which the subject is of an overtly secular nature. As such, it provides valuable insight into the character of Bale himself that the other plays may not.

Perhaps the most interesting fact about the play lies in its provenance. The extant manuscript of *Kynge Johan* currently is in the collection of the Huntington Library in Pasadena, California. It was purportedly found in the town records of Ipswich, and was

9 McKlusker, *John Bale*, xi, xii.

10 Fox, *Politics and Literature*, 3.

11 Bale wrote more than twenty plays for which the only extant evidence is in his own catalogs. See Blatt, *Plays of John Bale*, 20.

published in 1838 by Jeremy Collier. There is no earlier record of publication. The manuscript consists of two separate pieces. The first part (the “A text”) is in an unknown hand, probably belonging to what Happé calls an “an experienced scribe . . . who was transcribing from a copy, presumably by Bale himself.”<sup>12</sup> Bale’s corrections can be seen with increasing frequency throughout the A text until the latter part (the “B text”) is reached. This section is in Bale’s own hand, and apparently is an entirely rewritten version.

Happé notes that it is probable the “two versions of the play may very well have been written at widely separated times in Bale’s life.”<sup>13</sup> In terms of the date of composition, even though the title appears in all four of Bale’s catalogs of his works (the earliest of which, the *Anglorum Heliades*, appeared in 1536) there is no way to determine the exact date of composition of either the A or B text of the play. For one thing, there is evidence that *Anglorum Heliades* was revised as late as 1539—the year we think the play originally was produced.

Further, there is both physical and textual evidence that the B text was not written at the same time as its predecessor. Historians cite changes in Bale’s handwriting style as evidence. Additionally, there is physical evidence to support a date of 1558 for the B text in the form of a watermark on the pages in Bale’s own hand. Textual indications in the B text clearly place Bale’s revisions after Elizabeth’s accession in 1558, and perhaps as late as 1560, when Bale returned to England from his second exile, and was awarded a stipend at Canterbury. Lines 2626 through 2645 in the B text provide a clear reference to the Elizabethan policy on the Anabaptists and in a final speech, the character “Nobylyte” notes:

Englande hath a queene thankes to the Lorde above  
Whych maye be a lyghte to other princes all  
For the godly wayes whome she doth dayly move  
To her liege people through Gods wurde specyall  
She is that Angell as saynt Johan doth hym call  
That with the Lordes seale doth marke out  
his true servauntes Pryntyng in their hartes  
his holy wourdes and covauntes.<sup>14</sup>

12 Happé, *John Bale*, 89.

13 Happé, *John Bale*, 91.

14 Bale, *Kynge Johan*, 102

### Traditional Views of *Kynge Johan*

McCusker notes that *Kynge Johan* was “Bale’s most important play, and the only one for which we have evidence of frequent performance.” While it is that, there are also two other traditional niches that *Kynge Johan* occupies in the historio-literary continuum. First, it is generally regarded as the first English history play or “the first attempt at a chronicle play, the earliest example of a species which was later to become one of the most popular on the sixteenth century stage.”<sup>15</sup> In a similar vein, in *Shakespeare’s Predecessors in the English Drama*, John Addington Symonds calls *Kynge Johan* a “hybrid,” but notes that it “is the earliest extant specimen on the history.” He explains:

the interesting feature of the performance is that personifications, including the Nobility, the Clergy, Civil Order, the Commonality, Variety and Imperial Majesty are all introduced in dialogue with real historical beings. The Vice too, under the name Sedation, plays his usual pranks, while Dissimulation hatches the plot of the king’s murder.<sup>16</sup>

A second view of *Kynge Johan* is that it is one of the earliest extant examples in English literature of the use of the drama as Protestant propaganda. Along these lines Symonds suggests that “*King Johan* must be read less as a history drama than as a pamphlet against Papal encroachment and ecclesiastical corruption.”<sup>17</sup> Likewise, Charles Brooke, in *The Tudor Interlude*, while speaking of Bale’s other plays notes that “Bale’s concern is exclusively with the Papists, whom he makes responsible, not only for the burning of Christ’s law, but for the leprosy of the Law of Nature and blinding and laming of Moses of as well . . . Bale’s most famous play, *King Johan*, breathes the same spirit.”<sup>18</sup> While all these views are undoubtedly correct, they overlook the necessity for the Tudor writers to adapt a practical attitude to their writing.

15 McCusker, *John Bale*, 90.

16 Symonds, *Shakespeare’s Predecessors*, 146.

17 Symonds, *Shakespeare’s Predecessors*, 146.

18 Brooke, *Tudor Interlude*, 88.

### John Bale and Thomas Cromwell

Of Bale's relationship with Thomas Cromwell, little detail is actually known. In the *Scriptorum*, Bale noted of Cromwell:

Exutus fortunis omnibus, ex concionead tribunalia mox trahebar, Eboraci primum sub Laeo, Londini postea sub Stokisleyo: sed pius Cromvuelus, qui regi Henrico ab intimus erat, ob editas comoedias me semper liberauit<sup>19</sup> [Freely translated: As luck would have it, when I was placed before reactionary tribunals from York under the auspices of Archbishop Lee and from London under Bishop Stokesley, the pious (or upright, or dutiful) Lord Cromwell, an intimate advisor of King Henry, always had me freed because of the comedies that I wrote.]

At the very least, this confirms that Bales' relationship to Cromwell was strong enough that on a number of occasions, including the two already mentioned, Cromwell protected Bale.

When coupled with Cromwell's known connections to other literary personalities, a stronger relationship between the two men is suggested. Cromwell had dealings with Clement Urmston and John Rastell among others. Anglo notes that both men were involved in a print campaign using both published prose and imagery that was intended to present Henry to his subjects as a mystic being stronger than the Pope<sup>20</sup>. Additionally Cromwell's dealings with John Rastell included the publication of at least one anti-papal book (*Book of Charge*) that was to be circulated and publicly read all over England so that the commoners would "have no faith in the pope nor his laws."<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, as both Urmston and Rastell were involved in the production of Henrician court masques in 1527, and as Rastell was a playwright who built a theatre on his own property, there would seem to be ample opportunity for he and Bale to have been acquainted prior to the events of 1537.

19 Bale, *Scriptorum*, 702.

20 Anglo, *Specticle*, 265.

21 Anglo, *Specticle*, 265. Bale knew Rastell by 1537. In fact, as the latter was an endorser on the former's *Answer of John Bale*... and may have been party to the same charges. Whether Bale knew Urmeson is unclear, but it seems likely.

### ***Kynge Johan as Tudor Propaganda***

**P**erhaps the most important evidence of Bale's work as a Tudor propagandist becomes evident upon examination of play in terms of political metaphor. At its very simplest, *Kynge Johan* tells a story that the English people, noble and commoner, are all familiar with.

There are, however a number of hints in the A text that Bale's early intent is to support the Henrician monarchy. For example he addresses the divine right of the English King in several places. For example, in lines 100 through 104 the character Englande argues:

Englande; Trwly of the devyll they are that do onythyng  
To the subdewing of ony christen King.  
For be he goos or bade he is of Godes appoyntyng.<sup>22</sup>

The King is of God's choosing, not the Popes, and is thus subject only to God's will. Another example can be found in the monologue that ends Act I. In this speech (lines 1087-1090) the Interpreter speaks immediately after the scene in which the Pope, Sedicyon (Steven Langton), and Privat Welth plot the overthrow of John. The Interpreter states:

In thys present acte we have to yow declared  
As in a myrrour the befynnyng of Kynge Johan,  
How he was of God a magistrate appointed  
To the governaunce of thys noble regyon,  
To see maynteyned the true faith and relygyon.  
But Satan the Devyll, which that tyme was at large,  
Had so great a swaye that he coulde it not discharge.<sup>23</sup>

22 Bale, *Kynge Johan*, 32.

23 Bale, *Kynge Johan*, 57.



On one level this is straight anti-clerical diatribe. Yet on another John rules not at the pleasure of the Pope, or as his feudal inferior but as a sovereign monarch and “of God . . . appointed.” As the Pope has just left he is obviously being discussed as “Satan the Devyll,” but it is likely that the time being discussed refers not only to the internal time of the play, but also to that of the production. The statement thus becomes one in favor of the independence of England from Rome and the sovereignty of the Tudor monarchy. Further, as Bale may have played the role of the Interpreter himself,<sup>24</sup> this speech can be interpreted as his direct commentary on the present situation.

There is symbolism inherent in the B text as well. Here the characters actually begin to present a very sophisticated political metaphor. Dissymulacyon, an agent of Rome, poisons King John. Upon discovering this fact, and as John is dying, Englande responds “With the leave of God I will not leave ye thus. /But styll be with ye tyll he do take yow from us.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, foreigners have poisoned the monarch, but the nation must stand behind the monarchy. John dies, yet the English monarchy is reborn, phoenix-like, in the person of Imperial Majesty. The king, suzerain to higher authority such as the Pope is replaced by an Imperial Majesty, sovereign in his own right in his own kingdom.

This notion of Imperial Monarchy would have a particular resonance to an elite audience such as probably witnessed the performance of *King Johan* in Canterbury. Medieval concepts of Roman Law differentiated between the suzerainty of kings, and the sovereign power of emperors. The lawyers of Philip II of France called him Philip Augustus not as a title of respect for his wisdom, but to symbolize that he held sovereign power in his own kingdom. He was not merely a king, suzerain over a feudal pyramid of nobles united by oaths of allegiance, but a sovereign with the rights to make

24 Happé, John Bale, 122. See note for line K1086 ff .

25 Bale, *Kynge Johan*, 86.

laws and proclamations that pertained to all his subjects.<sup>26</sup> In other words, Imperial Majesty meant the Medieval and Early Modern equivalent of what we today call national sovereignty, the State, in this case of course personified by the English king, which possesses powers over its subjects, internal affairs, and very existence with which no outside power may interfere. Imperial Majesty, therefore, symbolized a totally independent England, and a king whose powers extended to all his subjects, which, in the literal sense of the word in Latin, meant he had the “right to command” any humans placed under his lawful jurisdiction. This seems almost a declaration that the King is the State, a declaration which means far more than that the English Church is no longer subject to the authority of the Bishop of Rome.

Further, if the A text and the B text were, as Happé suggests, written at separate times, it could well mean that Bale’s purposes for the play may have changed over time. That the play appears to have been updated and adapted to reflect further developments in the English Reformation, is only a stronger indication that the piece could have been originated as a play to help the Crown promulgate Royal Supremacy not just over the English Church, but over the entire nation, and all its subjects, be they high or low.

### **Conclusions**

John Bale’s *Kynge Johan* remains important to historian and student for a number of reasons. Aside from being one of the few extant dramatic works of John Bale, it represents the earliest English history or chronicle play. It also certainly presents protestant propaganda as well. There is more to it than that, however. Not only does it provide another piece of evidence of the propaganda machine assembled by Thomas Cromwell to assist with the divorce of Henry VIII from Catherine of Aragon, it places John Bale as part of that machine.

<sup>26</sup> Fawtier, *Capetian Kings*, 140-55.

Bale was, to put it mildly, one of the more vocal advocates of the English Reformation. As all of his extant plays come from the period of his life thought to contain his personal conversion, there appears to be good reason to argue that they are all related to The Reformation, and that *Kynge Johan* was intended as a Protestant propaganda piece.

Yet the so-called Henrician reformation was not aimed at a total reformation of the English church along Lutheran or Calvinist models. Although it provided a starting point for further Protestant reforms in England, Henry's reformation was aimed at creating a secure secession to the throne of Henry VIII. It was this goal that saw the creation of Thomas Cromwell's propaganda machine and its liberal use of all possible means of communication to move people away from loyalty to the Church of Rome. After all, the central message of *Kynge Johan* is that when England's clergy subordinated its rightful loyalty to England and its lawful king to a foreign, Italian pope, the realm was plunged into civil war and ruination. When that message is coupled with John Bale's relationship to Cromwell, it becomes clear that, regardless of Bale's later intent, originally *Kynge Johan* deliberately aimed at the creation of popular sentiment to support King Henry's "great matter."

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