Groundings Undergraduate Academic Journal

University of Glasgow | Glasgow University Union

'The mounting spirit': empowering competition and challenging tradition in Shakespeare's *King John*

Author(s): Andrew Steel

Source: Groundings Undergraduate, April 2014, Vol. 7, pp. 125-137

Published by: Glasgow University Dialectic Society, University of Glasgow

ISSNs: 1754-7474 (Print) | 1755-2702 (Online)

'The mounting spirit': empowering competition and challenging tradition in Shakespeare's *King John*

Andrew Steel

The Life and Death of King John by William Shakespeare is a dramatization of the reign of John, King of England. In comparison to Shakespeare's other history plays, the subversive ideological messages of the play have been somewhat overlooked by scholars. Theories which have enhanced understanding of the allusions to Republicanism in the works of Shakespeare allow for a more comprehensive interpretation of *King John* as a play which has an ideological purpose. This article explores the way in which self-referential and meta-theatrical devices within the text indicate an attempt on the part of Shakespeare to reflect the growing political awareness and aspirations of the burgeoning Fourth Circle. In doing so, it could be argued that Shakespeare subtly makes the case for an alternative method of government in a country that was beginning to change.

> But this is worshipful company / and fits the mounting spirit like myself[1]

Shakespeare's *The Life and Death of King John* (1596) has traditionally been considered a poor relation to his historical tetralogies. Previous interpretations of the play have focused on its rejection of history as having an ideological purpose, or have dismissed it owing to its structural untidiness. Cohen refers to the plot promising 'more coherence than it delivers'[2] and this lack of structural focus may have led critics to overlook encoded, potentially subversive, signals within the text. I will instead interrogate *King John* within the subcategory of 'republican Shakespeare studies' - examining whether the evidence in the text points to alternative sources of legitimisation of sovereignty within the context of the time. I will explore how self-referential and meta-theatrical evidence in the text highlights the intended link between message and audience, noting the way in which Shakespeare departs from the reactionary religious focus of the source

ANDREW STEEL is a final year English literature student at the University of Glasgow. He hopes to pursue a career in creative writing.

[1] W. Shakespeare, *King John* in *The Norton Shakespeare Histories* (London, 1997), I.1.205-206.

[2] W. Cohen, 'Introduction to King John' in S. Greenblatt *et al* (eds.), *The Norton Shakespeare Histories* (London, 1997), 485.

material and turns his attention to a progressive alternative for the future; a refined version of Collinson's monarchical republic.[3] Delivered to the broad commons but aimed at a specific subsection of it, *King John* deserves reappraisal as one of Shakespeare's most daring political works.

THE POLITICS OF LATE TUDOR ENGLAND

Noting Shakespeare's opposition to the rule of corrupt or ineffective nobility, Skinner's conclusion that, for Shakespeare, 'the world of politics and the life of virtue appeared to be largely incompatible'[4] is hard to fault. It with this failure in mind that *King John* presents an alternative system to the audience, an alternative which is highlighted in the text, characters and the performative meta-theatricality of the play.

The claim that *King John* is partly aimed at the 'common playgoers standing in front of the stage'[5] requires a radically different view of the broad commons as seen in Shakespeare's work. Quentin Skinner notes that 'when the ordinary populace contribute to the action, they appear as little better than a fickle mob.'[6] Similarly, Cohen suggests that 'King John accords the English people an even more marginal role in constituting the nation'[7] than usual. However, while the political message of *King John* may be delivered to the broad commons of an audience, it is aimed at a specific subsection within it; those belonging to what we might call the 'Fourth Circle'. Identified by Collinson as those involved in local administration who governed autonomously but remained loyal to the crown. This subsection of the audience included capable townsmen who operated as effective administrators at a local level and had ambitions to govern nationally.[8] Shagan notes the tension inherent between 'the centralising impulse of humanist ideology and...the 'federal'

---

[3] P. Collinson, 'The monarchical republic of Queen Elizabeth' in *Elizabethan Essays*, (London, 1994), 31-57.

[4] Q. Skinner, 'Afterword: Shakespeare and humanist culture' in D. Armitage *et al* (eds.), *Shakespeare & Early Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2012), 281.

[5] A. Hadfield, *Shakespeare & Republicanism*, (Cambridge, 2005), 3.

[6] Skinner, 'Afterword', 28.

[7] Cohen, 'Introduction to King John', 488-489.

[8] Collinson, *Elizabethan Essays,* 31-57.

impulse of traditionally heterogeneous communities'[9], and it seems logical that the sixteenth century drive and energy which Baldwin Smith identifies was present at a local level before spreading nation, and then world, wide:

> The population exploded with all the concomitant human misery and concerns of urban growth. Europe commenced that absolute upset of the world balance of power that for four centuries bestowed upon it the riches of the earth...the acquisitive spirit burst its Christian chains of moderation and charity, and with Cosimo de Medici claimed God the father, God the son, and God the Holy ghost as debtors.[10]

If we identify within the intended audience the politically frustrated competitive class which would go on to forge the modern England, we can find other examples in Shakespeare which support this theory of proto-democratisation. For example, the guildsmen of 'Richard III', who refuse to acclaim the Duke of Gloucester when Buckingham puts him forward for the throne[11], could hardly be described as 'a fickle mob': such a class of men would have constituted Collinson's proto-clubmen[12], and their desires could not always be satisfied using their existing powers. Such a class, keen to acquire status, wealth and the lifestyle associated with them, would have been influenced by the implicit message that England, in their hands, could have a prosperous future, unhindered by the dynastic wars which had drained so much of her wealth and blood in centuries past.

The England of this period can be described as lying somewhere between a coterminous repressive brutality and a loose central authority. This suggests that it was possible for a playwright to deliver this message to late Elizabethan society, at a time when Republicanism was not considered to be a serious threat to Monarchism. [13] While central governance, in the person of the Queen,

---

[9] E. H. Shagan, 'The two republics: conflicting views of participatory local government in early Tudor England' in John F. MacDiarmid (ed.), *The Monarchical Republic of Early Modern England* (Hampshire, 2007), 20.

[10] L. Baldwin Smith, *Treason in Tudor England: Politics and Paranoia* (London, 1986), 179.

[11] W. Shakespeare, *Richard III* in S. Greenblatt *et al* (eds.), *The Norton Shakespeare Histories,* (London: 1997), Act III.7.5-55.

[12] Collinson, *Elizabethan Essays,* 396.

[13] Ibid., 401.

theoretically had ultimate authority, the reality was a country in which centralised control was weak: Loades speaks of 'great revolts in Yorkshire, Lincolnshire, Devon, Oxfordshire, Norfolk and Kent'.[14] Yet the implication of competition for legitimate sovereignty could only mean a weakening of power for those who held it. If we imagine a Shakespeare desperate for the patronage of Monarch, Lord or Bishop, such a reading of *King John* seems impossible. However, the example of Thomas Nashe shows us that an author could move from noble patronage to potentially dangerous levels of independence[15]; Nashe's work ranged from hagiography to 'completely new ways of experiencing the social, moral, political and material world of the 1590's'. [16] Hadfield has argued that republicanism, in one form or another, was a constant in English political life throughout the sixteenth century and was used by opposing factions dependent on which monarch they wished to support, depose or avenge.'[17] The point could be made that Shakespeare could hardly have avoided exposure to the furious political climate of Elizabethan and Jacobean England, one which 'no writer would have wished to avoid'.[18]

THE EVIDENCE OF THE CHARACTERS

Faulconbridge and the Citizen of Angers exemplify this interpretation of *King John*. Falconbridge's rise from the son of a soldier to the indispensable adjutant of a king surely surpassed the wildest dream of even the most ambitious members of Shakespeare's audience. Similarly, the Citizen of Angers' wise counsel and astute politicking on the walls of his town highlight both the failure of traditional kingship and an alternative method of effective statecraft and personal achievement, while simultaneously expressing the message that widening political enfranchisement, to include the 'Fourth Circle', could deliver fresh impetus and popular legitimacy to even the most usurping of monarchs.

---

[14] D. Loades, 'Provincial & regional identity' in *Power in Tudor England* (Hampshire, 1997), 148-149.

[15] L. Hutson, 'Fictive acts: Thomas Nashe & the mid-Tudor legacy' in Mike Pincombe and Cathy Shrank (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Literature 1485-1603* (Oxford, 2007), 721.

[16] Ibid., 732

[17] Hadfield, *Shakespeare & Republicanism,* 18-53.

[18] Ibid., 1.

It is possible that the 'Fourth Circle' may not have appreciated the similarity of their aims and those of a character called 'the bastard', but the character of Faulconbridge insists upon a visual, as well as a textual, interpretation. When attributing dialogue to Faulconbridge, Shakespeare repeatedly uses the word 'Bastard' to re-establish his social origins. When performed, however, Falconbridge's physical actions on the stage are a means of drawing attention to his impressive rise through the social hierarchy. The Falconbridge family represent the proto-middle class: the son of a knight (a knighthood earned by deed and not by inheritance) and, by the standards of the time, a comfortably wealthy soldier.[19] Falconbridge serves as an example of what can be achieved through self-belief, action and, that most indispensable of patrons, luck. There would surely have been an element of identification between the character and the audience: Faulconbridge spoke for many when he expressed his frustrations as the limit of his life: 'and why rail I on this commodity? | But for because he hath not woo'ed me yet!'.[20] And the ladder shall, in true aspirant fashion, be hauled up behind him: 'Well, whiles I am a beggar I will rail | and say there is no sin but to be rich | and being rich, my virtue shall then be | to say there is no vice but beggary.'[21] This expression of unwillingness to be constrained by traditional social boundaries is emphatic: the journey from 'beggar' to rich man may be a long one, but it would no longer be considered impossible.

Faulconbridge is hardly alone in being raised into such exalted company: in *Henry IV*, Falstaff enjoys the youth of the young Prince Henry as much as Prince Henry himself, he is forever on the point of being disgraced and abandoned through his misdeeds or affronts to royal dignity. Faulconbridge ensures this cannot happen – he is the self-made man who is considered to be indispensable by the King - and by so doing ensures his continued rise and safety. Serious and effective, he is the opposite of the debased and dishonourable Falstaff.

The play's concluding scene emphasises the extent to which Faulconbridge has risen through the social hierarchy. It is to Faulconbridge that John expresses his

[19] Shakespeare, *King John,* I.1.50-54.
[20] Ibid., II.1.589.
[21] Ibid., II.1.594-597.

dying affection: 'O cousin, thou art come to set mine eye'[22] and it is Faulconbridge, not the heir, Prince Henry, who commands attention throughout the conclusion of the play. Henry's lines are couplets, whereas Faulconbridge's dialogue is much more extensive, including the closing monologue with its ostensibly patriotic message:

> This England never did, nor never shall | Lie at the foot of a proud conqueror | But when it did first help to wound itself...Naught shall make us sue | If England to itself do rest but true.[23]

This dialogue is made all the more subtle by the ambiguity as to which 'England' he is referring to. The regret of such a man at the loss of his patron is to be expected, but the attention of the audience is, nevertheless, entirely focused on Faulconbridge and it is through him that Shakespeare delivers his final thoughts on kingship, purpose and politics [24] The disdain and contempt that Faulconbridge shows for the nobles as he addresses them is plain to see:

> Now, now, you stars that move in your right spheres / Where be your powers?[25]

It is Faulconbridge who even assumes responsibility for Prince Henry: 'And you, my noble prince, |with other princes that may best be spared, |shall wait upon your father's funeral.'[26] Rarely can self-promotion have reaped such a reward; Faulconbridge's expression of devotion shortly thereafter[27] reads more plausibly as deflecting his rise from bastard to de facto Protector than genuine angst; his intention to retain his influence over the new king is quite unmistakable. This is a character, having challenged the traditional order, who has no intention of abandoning his gains and joining John in heaven.[28]

---

[22] Ibid., V.7.51.
[23] Ibid., V.7.112-118.
[24] Ibid., V.7.70-120.
[25] Ibid., V.7.74-75.
[26] Ibid., V.7.96-98.
[27] *Shakespeare, King John, V.7.100-105.*
[28] Ibid., V.7.70-72.

The character of the Citizen of Angers plays a smaller role compared to that of Faulconbridge in *King John,* but crucially he is used to contrast sharply with the destructive failure of traditional kingship and to convey the possibility of an alternative. Significantly, the Citizen of Angers is not ennobled in the *dramatis personae* (the Norton edition simply lists him as 'a CITIZEN of Angers') yet it is he that does not conform to expectations when he addresses King John and King Philip with the respect and reverence that they demand.[29] Placed in an impossible position – for the Citizen to recognise either party as liege would lead to destruction from the other – he ingeniously rebuffs their increasingly furious, but impotent, ultimatums: 'he that proves the king | to him we will be loyal. Till that time, | have we rammed up our gates against the world'.[30] The possessive 'our' when referring to the town gates, and also the rejection of the world out with those gates, indicates a growing sense of autonomy within the city. Further, there is, a suggestion that it will be the right of towns, rather than the right of kings, which takes precedence thereafter: 'Till you compound whose right is worthiest | We for the worthiest hold the right from both'. [31] While this certainly acknowledges that, eventually, suzerainty will be recognised, it must first go through the process of establishing their rights as citizens. Already we see a departure from feudal concept of 'might is right'. Furthermore, after the armies clash, Angers is still unwilling to declare for either side, and rejects each king's fictitious claims of victory. Faulconbridge, having dealt with the King of Austria and his army, summarises: 'By heaven, these scroyles of Angers flout you, Kings'.[32] This accurate summary of Angers attitude to the warring monarchs is all the more effective in that neither town nor citizens receive any form of chastisement for their insolence. The ethos of Divine Right is defeated by effective politics.

This is potentially the most subversive theme in *King John*, and that is why Shakespeare elsewhere in the play refers to 'all England' in 'this morsel of dead royalty'[33]: evidently discretion came along with democratic valour. A balance needed to be found between upholding traditional elitist rule and promoting the

[29] Ibid., II.1.
[30] Ibid., II.1.271-273.
[31] Ibid., II.1.281-282.
[32] Ibid., II.1.373.
[33] Ibid., IV.3.143-144.

legitimate interests of the burgeoning 'Fourth Circle'. In order to avoid the charge of sedition, there was a need to be subtle.

Eventually it is the Citizen who finds a way out of the destructive cycle of violent stalemate. While the kings are reduced to a nihilistic and illogical situation - reduce the town to rubble then fight over the ruins – it is the Citizen who proposes the alliance between Arthur and Blanche. [34] While making this proposition of 'peace and fair-faced league'[35], the Citizen also rearticulates the city's determination to maintain its defiant stance:

> But without this match | The sea enraged is not half so deaf, | Lions more confident, mountains and rocks | More free from motion, no, not Death himself | As we to keep this city.[36]

In addition to defiance, the reference to lions is a means of mocking the King of Austria, who wears Richard Coeur-de-Lion's lion skin, and is ridiculed mercilessly by Faulconbridge for doing so.[37] The citizen's speech also, however, appropriates the iconography not only of kingship (the lion) but of divinity: a reference to the created world, usually credited to God, elevates their determination above even death itself.

Faulconbridge and the Citizen are ambitious, determined and have political objectives that they hope to achieve for themselves and for their city. The Citizen's self-assured insistence on legitimacy ('Till you compound whose right is worthiest | We for the worthiest hold the right from both')[38] is a clear expression of civic confidence. Shakespeare posits the idea of political empowerment and suggests that those who compromise the elite may be challenged and even replaced by those who have legitimate political demands. This reforming message is secreted amidst declaration of loyalty to great kings [39] and unconvincing

[34] Ibid., II.1.424-456.
[35] Ibid., II.1.418.
[36] Ibid., 451-454.
[37] Shakespeare, *King John,* II.1.290-293.
[38] Ibid., II.1.281-282.
[39] Ibid., II.1.417.

discussions about the unifying nature of royalty.[40] It is unlikely, however, that those in the 'Fourth Circle' would have missed Shakespeare's subtle message. In this regard, Shakespeare incorporates an ideological message into the dialogue of the play. The intended audience would have had an affinity with Faulconbridge and the Citizen because those characters vocalize the growing political awareness of the 'Fourth Circle'.

SELF-REFERENTIALITY AND META-THEATRICALITY

There are signposts for the audience to follow as the play progresses, some obvious and some hidden in a form of cipher, intended to be read by those comprising the 'Fourth Circle'. Actor-audience interaction is surely required in the opening lines, when Elinor responds to Chatillon's barbed address to John: 'A strange beginning, 'borrowed majesty'?'[41] While the 'fourth wall' is often absent in Tudor theatre, it is not always appropriate: it is hard to imagine an actor playing Cordelia slyly winking at the audience in the way that Eleanor does in *King John.* Yet, it is not a comedy: it is a history, and hardly a light one at that. Shakespeare involves the audience from the outset in order to engage their attention fully. This history play is by no means a didactic lesson from the past, but an interactive exchange in which the audience, far from losing themselves in the play, are encouraged to raise their political aspirations.

The artifice and performativity of what is before the audience is quite explicit, in evidence when Faulconbridge says 'By Heaven, these scroyles of angers flout you, kings / and stand securely on their battlements / as in a theatre, where they gape and point / at your industrious scenes and acts of death.'[42] There is a sense of inclusiveness in these lines, combined with the implied differentiation between those yokels who 'gape and point' and those 'industrious' audience members who are meant to engage with the message of the play. Those 'scroyles' of Angers could easily be the men of Swallowfield, Coventry or anywhere else in England, who 'will be esteemed.'[43] The theatre is the ideal medium in which to contemplate this

[40] Ibid., IV.3.144.
[41] Ibid., I.1.5.
[42] Ibid., II.1.373-376.
[43] Collinson, *Elizabethan Essays,* 33.

alternative vision of society, with the lines 'I am a scribbled form / drawn with a pen / upon a parchment'[44] suggesting that the majesty of kingship can be reduced to the compass of an upstart crow's quill, with the dying John contained like an imprisoned djinn.

SHAKESPEARE'S ALTERNATIVE FOCUS

The lack of focus that Shakespeare affords to religious affairs in *King John* strengthens the case for a reading which challenges established tradition. Although it is generally accepted that *King John* is sourced from both Bale's *King Johan* and the anonymous *The Troublesome Raigne of King John*, the focus in Shakespeare's play undergoes a paradigm shift, away from the bellicose religiosity of Bale and excising completely the broad humour and anti-clericalism of, for example, the monastery scene in *Troublesome Raigne*[45]. Given Shakespeare's own youthful, and perhaps lifelong, Catholicism[46], it is no surprise that he shows disdain for the rampant Protestant propaganda of Bale's *King Johan* in his own writing, while the years which passed between the two, between 30 to 54 years, may have played a part in reducing the need for Bale's less than subtle bombast.

It is undeniable that *King John* shows the Papal Legate Pandolph interfering with the politics of England and France. Given the degree of conflict between the two, however, it is tempting to read in the Cardinal a sympathetic political figure who contrasts with the thin-skinned kings and vacillating nobles. Even the fact that John's death is hastened by poison handed him by a monk, in revenge for the pillaging of the monasteries to fund John's wars, is understated by Shakespeare: 'The king, I fear, is poisoned by a monk'[47] and later 'A monk, I tell you; a resolved villain'.[48] When compared to the quantity of dialogue used to describe the regicide in *Troublesome Raigne's* - one hundred and eleven lines - it could be argued that Shakespeare did not want the murder of King John to overshadow the central message that he tries to convey to the audience.

---

[44] Shakespeare, *King John*, V.7.32-33.
[45] Anon., *The Troublesome Raigne of King John,* (New York, 1979).
[46] R. Wilson, *Secret Shakespeare* (Manchester, 2004).
[47] Shakespeare, *King John*, V.4.24.
[48] Ibid., V.4.30.

CONCLUSION

It is difficult to read *King John* in conjunction with the source material and not be struck by the way in which Shakespeare takes the recognised story of King John in a completely new direction. I have set out what I believe this direction to be, but establishing the definitive meaning of a Shakespeare play is, in best theatrical tradition, fraught with trapdoors, smoke and mirrors. Condren, examining *Measure for Measure*, accurately observes 'the absence of a direct authorial voice to restrain our flights of fancy'[49] , which allows potential for elaborate re-encodings or, as he more politely puts it, 'the reader's diffuse imaginings.'[50] I certainly do not wish to argue that *King John* advocates the adoption in England of an *Unum e pluribus* system, but that it suggests taking into account the views and making use of the abilities of those born out with the charmed circle of aristocracy. Unlike previous interpretations of the play, which have focused either on its rejection of history or have dismissed it owing to its structural untidiness, the ideological purpose of *King John* has been repeatedly overlooked. Cohen refers to the plot promising 'more coherence than it delivers'[51] – a reasonable criticism which allows for a wide variety of different interpretations. Republican studies within the Shakespearean critical tradition have created an opportunity to reassess *King John* as a criticism of the established political order, hinting at a need for a limited popular mandate to legitimise sovereignty in late Elizabethan England. In this article I have argued that not only does *King John* explore the political and social concerns of the 'Fourth Circle', but that it does so in a way that encodes the suggestion – perhaps not revolutionary, but at least subversive and potentially seditious – that they, and not just the elite, had a part to play in deciding how England should be governed and what it could become.

---

[49] C. Condren, 'Unfolding the properties of 'government' in D. Armitage *et al* (eds.), *Shakespeare & Early Modern Political Thought*, (Cambridge, 2009), 159.

[50] Ibid., 159.

[51] Cohen, 'Introduction to King John', 485.

REFERENCES

PRIMARY

Anon, *The Troublesome Raigne of King John* (New York, 1979)

Bale, J., *King Johan* (London, 1931)

Shakespeare, W., *The Life and Death of King John* from *The Norton Shakespeare Histories* (London, 1997)

SECONDARY

Baldwin Smith, L., *Treason in Tudor England: Power & Politics* (London, 1986)

Cohen, W. 'Introduction to King John' from S. Greenblatt *et al* (eds.), *The Norton Shakespeare Histories* (London, 1997)

Collinson, P., 'The monarchical republic of Queen Elizabeth I' from *Elizabethan Essays* (London, 1994)

Condren, C., 'Unfolding the properties of 'government' from D. Armitage *et al* (eds.), *Shakespeare & Early Modern Political Thought*. (Cambridge, 2009), 157-175

Hadfield, A., *Shakespeare & Republicanism*, (Cambridge, 2005)

Hutson, L. 'Fictive Acts: Thomas Nashe & the mid-Tudor legacy' from Mike Pincombe and Cathy Shrank (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Literature1485-1603* (Oxford, 2007), 700-736

Loades, D., 'Provincial & Regional identity' from *Power in Tudor England* (Hampshire, 1997), 147-158

Shagan, E. H., 'The two republics: conflicting views of participatory local government in early Tudor England' from John F. MacDiarmid (ed.), *The Monarchical republic of Early Modern England*, (Hampshire, 2007), 19-36

Skinner, Q. 'Afterword: Shakespeare and humanist culture' from D. Armitage *et al* (eds.), *Shakespeare & Early Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2012), 271-281

Wilson, R., *Secret Shakespeare* (Manchester, 2004)