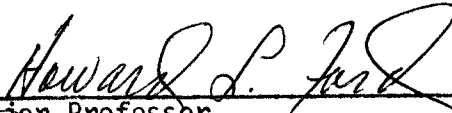
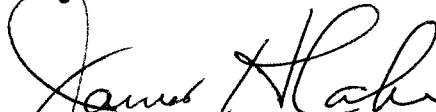
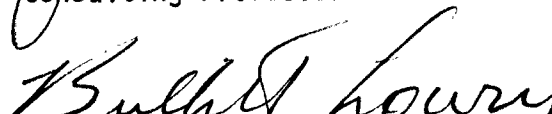


THE PROBLEM OF THE HERO IN
SHAKESPEARE'S KING JOHN

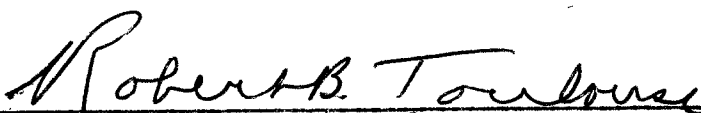
APPROVED:


Major Professor


Consulting Professor


Minor Professor


Director of the Department of English


Dean of the Graduate School

THE PROBLEM OF THE HERO IN
SHAKESPEARE'S KING JOHN

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
North Texas State University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

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By

Wilbert Harold Ratledge, Jr., B. A.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. THE MILIEU OF <u>KING JOHN</u>	7
III. TUDOR HISTORIOGRAPHY	12
IV. THE ENGLISH CHRONICLE PLAY	22
V. THE SOURCES OF <u>KING JOHN</u>	39
VI. JOHN AS HERO	54
VII. FAULCONBRIDGE AS HERO	67
VIII. ENGLAND AS HERO	82
IX. WHO IS THE VILLAIN?	102
X. CONCLUSION	112
BIBLIOGRAPHY	118

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

During the last twenty-five years Shakespeare scholars have published at least five major works which deal extensively with Shakespeare's history plays. In addition, many critical articles concerning various aspects of the histories have been published. Some of this new material reinforces traditional interpretations of the history plays; some offers new avenues of approach and differs radically in its consideration of various elements in these dramas.

King John is probably the most controversial of Shakespeare's history plays. Indeed, almost everything touching the play is in dispute. Anyone attempting to investigate this drama must be wary of losing his way among the labyrinths of critical argument.

Critical opinion is amazingly divided even over the worth of King John. Hardin Craig calls it "a great historical play,"¹ and John Masefield finds it to be "a truly noble play . . ."² On the other hand, E. K. Chambers dismisses it as "a bit of hack work."³ Dover Wilson suggests that Shakespeare wrote King John "while his mind was

¹Hardin Craig, An Interpretation of Shakespeare (New York, 1948), p. 83.

²M. M. Reese, The Cease of Majesty (New York, 1961), p. 260.

³E. K. Chambers, Shakespeare: A Survey (London, 1926), p. 100.

engaged elsewhere,"⁴ believing that "our lack of interest in King John is due to a certain lack of interest on the part of the author."⁵ M. M. Reese even tries to excuse Shakespeare's authorship by suggesting that he wrote King John as a "chore" for his dramatic troupe because a competing company had had success with a similar theme. He summarizes the dominant critical opinion when he notes that the play has enjoyed little favor from critics and that only occasionally has it appealed to theater audiences.⁶

In all the critical disagreement concerning King John, there is one point of agreement among a majority of critics: it is that there is a decided lack of unity in the play. Boas' criticism that the drama "falls short of being a rounded dramatic whole"⁷ is echoed by more recent scholars. E. M. W. Tillyard attributes the deficiency in unity to a lack of balance in the action and to a need for a unifying theme.⁸ The first three acts "give a well controlled account of complex political action,"⁹ but that action "loses its width or its intensity"¹⁰ in the last two acts. In fact, Tillyard believes that the events of the final third of the play are not properly motivated: they may be unified by the theme of rebellion, but they do not naturally arise from the

⁴Dover Wilson, editor, King John (Cambridge, 1936), pp. vii-viii.

⁵Ibid., p. vii.

⁶Reese, pp. 260-261.

⁷F. S. Boas, Shakespeare and His Predecessors (New York, 1904), p. 239.

⁸E. M. W. Tillyard, Shakespeare's History Plays (New York, 1962), pp. 246-247, 249, 264-265.

⁹Ibid., p. 264.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 265.

particular virtues of the play's first three acts.¹¹ He adds that there is not "any morality motive in the background to give a felt though indefinable unity."¹²

John Palmer agrees with earlier critics about the drama's lack of unity; he focuses his attack on the question of the hero, claiming that Shakespeare "failed to concentrate his material upon a central figure. The political issues were diverse and refractory; they refused to adhere. The play is accordingly little more than a succession of episodes, some of them brilliantly executed."¹³

Reese concurs in assigning the blame for the play's weakness to its faulty development of structure and characterization. He feels that the play does not have a focal point because "John is not an integrated character."¹⁴ Since John is not actually tragic, he fails as a hero. Thus, King John suffers from ambiguity in the poet's handling of the main character.¹⁵

The Danish critic Georg Brandes argues along these same lines. He sees John "as too unsympathetic to serve as the centrepoint of a drama."¹⁶ John's baseness leads the audience to preoccupation with lesser characters. The play lacks unity "because the King is powerless to hold it together."¹⁷

¹¹Ibid., pp. 246, 265.

¹²Ibid., p. 265.

¹³John Palmer, Political Characters of Shakespeare (London, 1945), p. 321.

¹⁴Reese, p. 261.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 267.

¹⁶Georg Brandes, William Shakespeare, I, translated by William Archer and Diana White (New York, 1963), 169.

¹⁷Ibid.

The traditional view of the play is summed up in the statement that "King John has been regarded as among the less successful of Shakespeare's plays, lacking in structure, with no obvious hero, a loose succession of scenes, saved only by the vitality of Faulconbridge and the poignancy of Constance."¹⁸

In the face of such substantial charges by the adherents of the majority opinion, one might be tempted to discount King John as an ineffective dramatic attempt by an immature--or unconcerned--Shakespeare. A few older critics and some recent writers, however, challenge this view of the play. They contend that the play has both consistency of thought and unity of structure.

Craig declares that King John is carefully written¹⁹ and that, although it is "somewhat archaic in style," it is "surprisingly mature in thought" ²⁰ Irving Ribner allows King John the virtues of Shakespeare's other early history plays--all of which, he says, have cohesive unity because they embrace a consistent philosophical scheme.²¹

On the other hand, Allardyce Nicoll defends the play's structure by arguing that its organization is least like that of a chronicle history. He finds it more unified and co-ordinate than Richard III or Richard II.²² Adrien Bonjour defends the unified dramatic structure of King

¹⁸Irving Ribner, Patterns in Shakespearean Tragedy (London, 1960), p. 38, note.

¹⁹Craig, p. 82.

²⁰Ibid., p. 83.

²¹Irving Ribner, The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare (Princeton, N. J., 1954), p. 290.

²²Allardyce Nicoll, British Drama (New York, 1925), p. 207.

John, arguing that John is the hero.²³ He suggests a revision of the traditional view of the play, which takes a faulty structure for granted.²⁴

James Calderwood combines some of Nicoll's objections in his attempt to demonstrate that the underlying theme of this disputed play is the opposition between Honor and Commodity. This theme "imparts to the play a unity of structure generally denied it."²⁵

Thus, there is obviously a difference of critical opinion about King John. Moreover, this divergence of judgment does not concern minor matters: it involves the heart of the play. If King John suffers from a faulty structure, it is a weak, poor play. On the other hand, if this history play has a cohesive unity--as some declare--then it is a work of art in its own right, and worthy of higher esteem than has generally been given to it.

There appear to be two major reasons for the critical attack on the play's dramatic unity. First, the play lacks a truly central character. Secondly, the play lacks a pervasive morality motive.²⁶ Of these two objections, the question of the central character or hero seems to be the crux of the criticism, for a real hero must actively participate in the unfolding of a play's theme if the play is to be unified. Therefore,

²³Adrien Bonjour, "The Road to Swinstead Abbey: A Study of the Sense and Structure of King John," English Literary History, XVIII (December, 1951), 253-274.

²⁴Ibid., p. 274.

²⁵James L. Calderwood, "Commodity and Honour in King John," University of Toronto Quarterly, XXIX (April, 1960), 34.

²⁶Bonjour, p. 255.

if it can be demonstrated that King John has a true hero, who, in fact, does serve as the focal point of a "morality motive," then the play's unity can be proved. If it can be shown that the play does not have a central character who is connected with a pervasive dramatic theme, then the traditional view of the play can be upheld.

Thus, this thesis is an attempt to evaluate the evidence for and against the presence of a hero in King John. As such, it is actually a search into the artistic abilities which Shakespeare exercised in this drama to determine whether he created a dramatic work of art which merits recognition for its own sake.

The first phase of the investigation will be an examination of Elizabethan ideas about the use of history, the English chronicle play, and Shakespeare's use of source material in King John. The purpose of this phase will be to try to find some clues to Shakespeare's dramatic purposes in the play and some suggestions for a guiding theme in the play.

The second and final phase of the study will be a consideration of three proposed heroes of the play to see if any one of them qualifies as a central character dynamically involved in the expression of a comprehensive moral theme. This will involve the identification of the villain of the play; and in the thematic conflict between the hero and the villain, the moral message of King John will be obvious.

CHAPTER II

THE MILIEU OF KING JOHN

King John was written in the eventful years of the early 1590's-- probably between 1592 and 1594¹--and any attempt to study the play must consider the historical and literary atmospheres in which it was created. The historical background includes the emotions and tensions of Elizabethan life and the prevailing attitudes toward history itself. The literary atmosphere includes all of the various literary expressions of the national spirit, but especially the English chronicle play.

The last decade of the sixteenth century was a period of anxiety, unrest, and uncertainty for England. The long reign of Queen Elizabeth was obviously coming to an end, and many difficulties faced the island kingdom in her last years. At least three major problems continually tried the patience and strength of the English: the fear of invasion, religious controversies, and the question of Elizabeth's successor.

The long, costly war with Spain did not end with the defeat of the Armada in 1588. The threat of a Spanish invasion continued for a number of years. On July 21, 1594, Sir Walter Raleigh received intelligence about the readying of a Spanish fleet, including large ships which could carry many soldiers.² Spanish soldiers actually landed in Cornwall and

¹Ribner, Patterns in Shakespearean Tragedy, p. 36.

²G. B. Harrison, An Elizabethan Journal, in The Elizabethan Journals: Being a Record of Those Things Most Talked of During the Years 1591-1603 (Ann Arbor, 1955), pp. 304-305.

burned three towns on July 26, 1595.³ The English expected an invasion from Spain within the next year when they learned that their old enemy was preparing an armada even greater than the one of 1588.⁴ These fears were not realized, of course; but they were none the less real.

The religious turmoil was perhaps as great a problem in this decade as it had been at any time in the entire Elizabethan age. Elizabeth's father, Henry VIII, had contradicted the claims of the Pope early in the century, and Elizabeth was still doing so when Shakespeare wrote his plays.⁵ Pope Pius V had excommunicated Elizabeth in 1570, absolving English Catholics from all duties of allegiance to her. By law it was an act of treason for any Catholic priest to enter the country, and in 1591 the English government announced that anyone harboring a priest would be considered the accomplice of a traitor. As rumors of a possible invasion stirred England, there was great anxiety that the Catholics would fight against the Queen if the Spanish actually attacked.⁶ Every Englishman had heard that Rome had played treacherously for Elizabeth's assassination and had openly assailed her legitimacy.⁷

Extreme Puritan factions caused Elizabeth further troubles. The patriotism which stirred men to a hatred of Rome and a love for the

³Ibid., A Second Elizabethan Journal, p. 39.

⁴Ibid., p. 41.

⁵J. C. Stobart, Shakespeare's Monarchs (London, 1926), p. 31.

⁶Harley Granville-Barker and G. B. Harrison, A Companion to Shakespeare Studies (Cambridge, 1964), pp. 169, 174-175.

⁷Stopford A. Brooke, Ten More Plays of Shakespeare (New York, 1913), p. 231.

fierce Calvinism which despised all compromise with Rome led to a distrust of Elizabeth's church.⁸ The result of the legislation of 1559 had been the establishment of a church that was quasi-Catholic in ceremony and ambiguously Protestant in doctrine. To the genuine Puritan, any compromise with Rome endangered the very future of Protestantism.⁹

Furthermore, the Puritans, who had not favored any marriage by Elizabeth to a foreign prince, had pleaded for Lady Katherine Grey to be elected to succeed Elizabeth because of her strongly Protestant family. Puritan writers also argued that kings not ruling for their people's welfare could be forcibly removed from office.¹⁰ Puritanism clashed continually with Tudor absolutism.

The Puritan protest did not go unchallenged. Elizabeth took an increasingly militant stance toward the non-conformists. She finally appointed Whitgift as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1583. He moved actively against the Puritans, creating the Court of High Commission, an ecclesiastical court that could act swiftly and secretly--unhindered by the formalities of law. The commission could secure evidence, call witnesses, and then levy sentences or fines without appeal.¹¹

In the spring of 1589 a number of important presbyterian leaders were called before the commission. When they refused to take an oath,

⁸John Richard Green, History of the English People (Chicago, 1882), II, 409.

⁹J. B. Black, The Reign of Elizabeth (Oxford, 1959), p. 189.

¹⁰Ribner, The English History Play, pp. 45, 47.

¹¹A. W. Rowse, The England of Elizabeth (New York, 1950), pp. 473-474; Black, pp. 198-199.

they were imprisoned until 1592. The Queen strongly supported Whitgift, and she kept Parliament from coming to the rescue of the embattled dissenters.¹² By the end of the 1580's, the archbishop had effectively throttled the strength of the Puritans. Yet, he could not wipe out the resentment and conviction that remained in their hearts--the seeds of dissent that later bloomed during the reign of the Stuarts.

The other cause of apprehension, the succession, became increasingly acute. After the execution of Mary Queen of Scots in 1587, no one had a clear title to the throne; furthermore, none of the possible claimants had general support, and Elizabeth forbade debate on the question.¹³ Civil war seemed inevitable, and the memory of the Wars of the Roses and the troubles following the death of Henry VIII caused anxieties to multiply.

For these and other reasons, Englishmen living in the closing years of the sixteenth century seemed to think of themselves as a nation "in touch with catastrophe."¹⁴ Such intense and traumatic problems were naturally reflected in the literary works of the age. Especially after the repression of free speech, "men found in drama a speaking commentary upon life which existed nowhere else."¹⁵ Thus, it is not surprising to discover that Shakespeare wrestled with many of the important political

¹²Black, pp. 203-204.

¹³Granville-Barker and Harrison, p. 177.

¹⁴Una M. Ellis-Fermor, The Jacobean Drama, 3rd ed. (London, 1953), p. 4.

¹⁵Granville-Barker and Harrison, p. 173.

questions which troubled sixteenth-century England.¹⁶ In fact, in no other Shakespearean play is there a greater appeal to the national spirit and honor of England than in King John.¹⁷

¹⁶Craig, p. 84.

¹⁷Brooke, p. 233.

CHAPTER III

TUDOR HISTORIOGRAPHY

Shakespeare's King John is in large part a commentary on some of the major political and religious questions of the last two decades of Elizabeth's reign. As such, it is an excellent example of the way the Tudor age interpreted the significance of history. From the professional historian in his library to the educated citizenry in all walks of life, it was accepted that there was an especial importance to the study of history.

For many reasons, Elizabethans were intensely interested in history. The era "witnessed an unexampled increase in historical writing."¹ Elaborate and expensive works of history and biography were published for wealthier readers, and hundreds of inexpensive tracts were printed to keep the average Englishman informed about the latest political events in Europe and Asia.²

This interest in history bloomed during the reign of Elizabeth, but its roots were planted early in the English Renaissance. In fact, two distinct historical traditions were blended in Elizabethan historiography without any apparent awareness of their inherent contradiction.³

¹Felix E. Schelling, Elizabethan Drama (New York, 1908), I, 249.

²Tucker Brooke, The Tudor Drama (Dallas, 1911), p. 299.

³Ribner, The English History Play, p. 24.

One was a humanistic influence, and the other was a medieval trend based on Christian doctrine.

The humanistic tradition was begun by Leonardo Bruni and his followers in Italy in the fifteenth century. The chief feature of this approach to history was its didactic purpose: past events could be studied to determine principles for dealing with present problems. This didacticism assumed man's ability to use his wisdom and strength in partially controlling his own destiny. The Renaissance humanists had found this idea in Greco-Roman historiography, where it had been a basic principle before being obscured during the Middle Ages by a Christian emphasis on man's frailty in the face of God's universal providence.⁴

Other tenets of the humanistic historians were the study of history for its own sake, the glorification of their native cities, and the study of periods of history whose problems appeared to resemble those of their own time. They generally assumed that the crises and challenges of history had a tendency to recur.⁵ Thus, humanistic historiography was nationalistic, periodic, and practical.

This new historical influence was introduced into England about 1430 by Tito Livio of Ferrara,⁶ who was commissioned by Duke Humphrey of Gloucester to write the biography of Henry V.⁷ When his work was translated into English in 1513, the anonymous translator dedicated it to

⁴Ibid., pp. 15, 18.

⁵Reese, pp. 11-12.

⁶Ibid., p. 43.

⁷Ribner, The English History Play, p. 5.

Henry VII in hope that the king would be inspired by the noble acts of his predecessor.⁸

The humanistic view of history received an impetus in 1506⁹ when Henry VII commissioned Polydore Vergil of Italy to demonstrate the Tudor right to the throne in a history of England.¹⁰ Henry's political aspirations demanded a secure claim to the English crown, so he advanced two historical premises to support his right to rule. The first proposed that his marriage to the York heiress, which united the houses of Lancaster and York, was the providential solution to the Wars of the Roses. The second claimed that he was a direct descendant of Cadwallader, the last Briton king, and suggested that he and his heirs were Arthur reincarnate.¹¹

Vergil took ten years to write his Anglia Historia. He carefully evaluated his evidence and was usually impartial and humane. He saw history repeating itself, so he looked for causes and effects in human events. His book was especially important because historians later in the sixteenth century used it freely.¹²

The greatest English work of humanist historiography was Sir Thomas More's Historie of Kyng Richarde the Thirde.¹³ Probably written in

⁸Reese, p. 13.

⁹Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁰Ribner, The English History Play, p. 5.

¹¹Tillyard, p. 40; Howard Lee Ford, "A Comparison of Christopher Marlowe's Edward II and William Shakespeare's Richard II," unpublished master's thesis, Department of English, North Texas State College, Denton, Texas, 1960, p. 7.

¹²Reese, p. 45.

¹³Ribner, The English History Play, p. 5.

1513--although not published until 1543--the unfinished history was one of the sixteenth century's most influential books because it irretrievably sealed Richard III's reputation. Yet, even though the historical portrait was unfair, the book was more than a protest against Richard's supposed tyrannies. More was in reality subtly attacking the harsh and competitive society that existed in the days of the early Tudors.¹⁴ "His real targets were tyranny and misgovernment wherever they might exist, and he wrote as an artist whose bias could not be concealed."¹⁵

More's great work was published in 1543 with John Hardyng's Chronicle, a record in verse of English history to 1436. These were issued by Richard Grafton, a printer who also continued Hardyng's history in prose down to his own day.¹⁶

Five years later, Grafton published posthumously Edward Hall's important chronicle, The Union of the two Noble and Illustre Famelies of Lancastre and York. This influential volume was based on the work of Polydore Vergil.¹⁷ Hall undoubtedly wrote to propagate the historical-political ideas of Henry VIII. His selective reading of history emphasized one main lesson: that destruction follows rebellion and civil disorder in a kingdom.¹⁸ Writing with a sense of moral drama,¹⁹

¹⁴Reese, p. 47.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 47-48.

¹⁶Ribner, The English History Play, p. 5.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Lily B. Campbell, editor, Shakespeare's "Histories": Mirrors of Elizabethan Policy (San Marino, Cal., 1947), p. 68.

¹⁹Tillyard, p. 53.

he chose events which suited his purpose, moralizing the past and transmitting the historical pattern of More and Vergil to the Elizabethan age. Hall's history was really a case of special pleading; he was appealing to his opponents, asking them not to make too much of their differences. He was showing them how much better affairs had been recently and was warning against jeopardizing the new security.²⁰

Hall was actually practicing what Italian humanist Jean Bodin systematized and popularized in Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitionum: the use of history to document political theory. Published in 1566 and then circulated throughout Europe, Bodin's influential work proposed that by studying history objectively, a person could learn universal principles which govern political institutions. Furthermore, if kings understood these laws, they could rule wisely and well.²¹ One must not forget that in 1581 Bodin came to England with the Duc d'Alencon on a visit to promote a marriage with Queen Elizabeth.²²

Shakespeare's access to the humanistic view of history came mainly through Raphael Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland.²³ This monumental work was in reality a group project that the printer, Reginald Wolfe, arranged; Holinshed might best be called the

²⁰Reese, pp. 51, 56-57.

²¹Ribner, The English History Play, p. 21.

²²Campbell, p. 30.

²³Ribner, The English History Play, p. 6.

co-ordinator of the project.²⁴ Other contributors besides Holinshed were William Harrison, Richard Stanyhurst, John Hooker, and Frances Thynne.²⁵ Their work was first published in 1577. Ten years later a greatly altered second edition--the one used by Shakespeare--appeared.²⁶

Holinshed was essentially a compiler whose pedestrian narrative conveyed the essence of Hall²⁷--and thus of Vergil. He was not a careful historian. His borrowings showed little understanding, and although he could not be as exhaustive as Hall, his omissions and abbreviations were not always intelligently chosen.²⁸

Nevertheless, Holinshed was useful to his contemporaries. His style was simple, his meaning easily understood, and he was more up-to-date than any of his predecessors.²⁹ Besides his usefulness, Holinshed is important because of his conformity to the new humanistic pattern of historical writing.³⁰ An example of this moralizing influence may be seen in his judgment of Richard II:

His chance verelie was greatlie infortunate, which fell into such calamite, that he tooke it for the best waie he could devise to renounce his kingdome, for the which mortall men are accustomed to hazard all they have to atteine thereunto. But such misfortune (or the like) oftentimes falleth unto those princes, which when they are cast aloft, cast no doubt for the perils that maie follow. He was prodigall, ambitious, and much given to the pleasure of the bodie. . . . How then could it continue prosperouslie with this king? against whom for the fowle enormities wherewith his life was defamed, the wrath of God was whetted and tooke so sharpe an edge,

²⁴Campbell, p. 72.

²⁵Reese, p. 58.

²⁶Ribner, The English History Play, p. 6.

²⁷Reese, p. 58.

²⁸Tillyard, pp. 62-63.

²⁹Ibid., p. 64.

³⁰Campbell, p. 75.

that the same did shred him off from the scepter of his kingdome, and gave him a full cup of affliction to drinke: as he had doone to other kings his predecessors, by whose example he might have taken warning. For it is an heavie case when God thundereth out his reall arguments either upon the prince or people.³¹

There is the trend: showing the significance of the facts and by them establishing general moral and political laws.³²

The humanist tradition of the Renaissance was only half of the stream of Elizabethan historiography. The other half was the medieval Christian current which flowed through the Middle Ages into the sixteenth century, possibly originating with St. Augustine's City of God. This view of history was anti-nationalistic, emphasizing world history. It was providential, stressing the outworking of the judgment of God in human events. It discovered in history a rational and intelligible design which was naturally good and which always affirmed God's justice.³³

Robert Fabyan's New Chronicles of England and France (1516) is a good example of a work written almost entirely from this point of view. Fabyan wrote in the vein of a medieval chronicler. He was indifferent to secondary causes in human behavior, presenting his facts "from a naively providential point of view."³⁴

Most sixteenth-century English writers, however, did not follow Fabyan's lead. They blended the best elements of the two schools of

³¹Raphael Holinshed, Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland, edited by Sir Henry Ellis (London, 1807), II, 368-269.

³²Campbell, p. 75.

³³Ribner, The English History Play, pp. 21-22.

³⁴Reese, p. 49.

historiography. On the one hand, historians as moralists revealed the benevolence and logic of God's plan, and they justified His interventions into human history. On the other hand, as humanists they recorded man's deeds as having a positive value. There was a place for man's self-determinism in God's will. Although it was enclosed in a scheme of fore-ordination, sixteenth-century history was not deterministic.³⁵

Polydore Vergil, urbane humanist that he was, even wrote that the deposition of Richard II was a crime that brought suffering to England until God sent Henry VII as a deliverer. While his history was in the main a concise and reasonable account of British history, it did contain this acknowledgement of divine intervention.³⁶

In his preface to Hardyng's Chronicle, Richard Grafton recited God's approval of history:

Wherefore Goddes worde and holy scripture
Which abandoneth all manner vanitee
Yet of Chronicles admitteth the lecture
As a thing of great fruite and utilitee
And as a lanterne, to the posteritee
For example, what they ought to knowe
What waies to refuse, and what to followe.³⁷

It is true that Edward Hall "had a completely modern and secular approach to history."³⁸ Yet, he also believed in divine intervention in human activity. He merged a pragmatic and secular view of history with a providential view when he identified the purposes of God with

³⁵Ibid., pp. 15-16.

³⁶Ibid., p. 46; Tillyard, pp. 46-47.

³⁷Campbell, pp. 57-58.

³⁸Keese, p. 52.

those of the Tudors. It was this blending of ideas that sanctified the Tudor myth.³⁹

This same union of the humanistic and the providential outlook upon history may be found in the second preface of Grafton's Chronicle at Large in 1569. Entitled "Thomas N. to the Reader," the preface listed numerous benefits that Grafton's history conferred. The writer-- identified as Thomas Norton, translator of Calvin's Institutes and part author of Gorboduc⁴⁰--included the following benefits.

Kings may learn to depend upon God and acknowledge his governance in their protection: the nobility may read the true honour of their ancestors: the ecclesiastical state may learn to abhor traitorous practices and indignities done against kings by the popish usurping clergy: high and low may shun rebellions by their dreadful effects and beware how they attempt against right, how unable soever the person be that beareth it: we all may be warned to thank God for the most virtuous wise and peaceable government that we now enjoy in comparison of terrible times heretofore. Each man may have a glass to see things past, whereby to judge justly of things present and wisely of things to come; to behold the beauty of virtue and deformity of vice, what sweetness remaineth after well doing, what stings of repentance evil doing leaveth. Men of elder honour may learn not to deface their forefathers' praise; the newer sort may seek to bring light and dignity to their houses. And finally all men in seeing the course of God's doings may learn to dread his judgments and love his providence: may see how good doings be defended; evil doings and wrongs revenged, blood with blood, violence with violence, injuries with miseries: and so grow into an affection to give each matter his right judgment, each superior his right duty, to each other that which justice or charity willeth, and to all well doers and among others to this setter forth of so many well doings such thankful acceptance as his whole life employed to common benefit hath deserved.⁴¹

In like manner Raphael Holinshed also exhibited the new humanism along with a demonstration of the relationship between individual sins and the corresponding vengeance of God. Thus, Shakespeare not only

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Tillyard, p. 70.

⁴¹Ibid., pp. 70-71.

found in Holinshed the history of Richard III, but he also found in the text and in marginal comments the morals that Holinshed used to adorn the story. These included such morals as "The just judgement of God severallie revenging the murther of the innocent princes upon the malefactors," and "The outward and inward troubles of tyrants by means of a grudging conscience."⁴²

Elizabethan historiography, therefore, was a fusion of two historical traditions into a single pattern. Primary applications of history were the teaching of moral and political lessons and the demonstration of human responsibility and divine governance in the world. This way of using history may be seen in Richard III, Richard II, King John, and the Henry IV plays. There Shakespeare uses history to glorify England, to support political doctrine, to assert a universal providence of God, and to demonstrate a rational plan in human affairs. In fact, most intellectual areas of the English Renaissance show an easy merging of the two different influences.⁴³

⁴²Campbell, p. 74.

⁴³Ribner, The English History Play, p. 24.

CHAPTER IV

THE ENGLISH CHRONICLE PLAY

By the time Shakespeare wrote King John, there was a literary tradition which had taken the philosophy of history displayed in the chronicles and had applied it for its own specific ends. This tradition began with a creative effort called A Mirror for Magistrates, written by several hands and published in 1559. This poetical work was "a series of imaginary monologues by the ghosts of certain eminent British statesmen who came to unfortunate ends."¹

The authors were not minor writers of their time. They were educated men already accepted as being important figures in their own age. They were the most skilled writing group during the reign of Mary, and they had an intimate acquaintance with the events about which they wrote.² The authors of only half of the stories are known. Nearly all of them were of high birth and held positions at court.³ Their leader was William Baldwin, known as a printer, poet, playwright, philosopher, and historian.⁴ Thomas Sackville, the Earl of Dorset and part-author of

¹Tillyard, p. 87.

²Lily B. Campbell, editor, The Mirror for Magistrates (Cambridge, 1938), pp. 20-21.

³Tillyard, p. 88.

⁴Campbell, "Histories," p. 106.

Gorboduc, was the most distinguished contributor to the series; and George Ferrers, a lawyer, was Baldwin's chief collaborator.⁵

Baldwin viewed history not as a story, not even a moralized story, but as a political mirror for use by those in authority.⁶ Therefore, as Baldwin stated in his dedication, the work's main purpose was to teach the prince or magistrate to shun vice by means of a succession of exemplary stories:⁷

For here as in a loking glas, you shall see (if any vice be in you) howe the like hath bene punished in other heretofore, whereby admonished, I trust it will be a good occasion to move you to the sone amendment. This is the chiefest ende, whye it is set furth, which God graunt it may be attayne.⁸

In other words, the purpose of the Mirror was to propagate the lessons which Tudor England thought it was the purpose of history to teach: political lessons regarding ruling and being ruled, lessons concerning the duties of kings, judges, counselors, and subjects.⁹

The political doctrine which the Mirror taught was the accepted Tudor doctrine.¹⁰ It went a step further, however. Besides asserting the duties of subjects towards their king, it also taught "the accountability of kings to the King of Kings--a part of the theory of the divine right less popular with the reigning monarchs."¹¹ The writers of

⁵Reese, p. 62.

⁶Campbell, "Histories," p. 106.

⁷Tillyard, p. 87.

⁸Campbell, Mirror, pp. 65-66.

⁹Campbell, "Histories," p. 110.

¹⁰Campbell, Mirror, p. 52.

¹¹Ibid., p. 53.

the Mirror held that God permits rebels to rage against a tyrant and that his kingdom could be taken away from him. In Sidney's words, the authors would "make kings fear to be tyrants."¹²

The ghosts of the statesmen were represented as addressing a group of men (actually the authors of the stories). Between stories, the writers made their own comments in prose. They commented on the stories themselves, their ideas of politics and ethics, and the fine points of their craft. In so doing, they revealed themselves to be a group who were eagerly interested in the problems of their own age.¹³

Their method was consistent: they chose a particular contemporary situation to be expounded, and then they found a historical parallel which presented the same political problem.¹⁴ The original nineteen stories covered the historical period from Richard II to Edward IV. The stories averaged less than two hundred lines each. Eight more were added in a 1563 edition, and a few others appeared in 1578 and 1587, carrying the history up to the reign of Henry VIII.¹⁵

The scope of the history covered by the Mirror was exactly that set forth in Hall's Chronicle. Internal evidence shows that most of the stories were taken from Hall, and the text itself acknowledges the debt.¹⁶ Thus it may be seen that the authors adopted Hall's

¹¹Ibid., p. 53.

¹²Campbell, Mirror, p. 53.

¹³Tillyard, pp. 87-88.

¹⁴Campbell, "Histories," p. 10.

¹⁵Tillyard, p. 881.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 96.

interpretation of history, and with it the method of both Vergil and Hall,¹⁷ selecting events in a given reign to mirror affairs in their own day,¹⁸ and even elaborating a forced correspondence if a pertinent example might be illustrated.¹⁹

It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of The Mirror for Magistrates. The work is invaluable as a statement of responsible opinion concerning politics and statecraft in the early part of the reign of Elizabeth.²⁰ Indeed, it assembled many of the current political ideas, and it gave them a new liveliness by setting them in poetical form.²¹ Yet the Mirror is even more significant because of its use of historical poetry in fulfilling the accepted aims of history. It "established literary precedent by its method of mirroring the present in the past."²² Thus it marked a transference to the poet of the accepted job of the historian.²³

The Mirror was immensely popular in its own day. Seven editions were published between 1559 and 1587. The work was so well liked that two imitation Mirrors were published to capitalize on the fame of the original. These two imitations, however, eventually destroyed the reputation of the original because they contained much poorly written

¹⁷Reese, p. 63.

¹⁸Campbell, "Histories," p. 109.

¹⁹Reese, p. 63.

²⁰Ibid., p. 62.

²¹Tillyard, p. 107.

²²Campbell, "Histories," p. 111.

²³Campbell, Mirror, p. 51.

poetry which did not have the clear purpose that distinguished the original Mirror.²⁴

The method of the Mirror had been anticipated in 1536 by John Bale's Kynge Johan, a piece of Protestant propaganda whose allegorical characters constantly turned into genuinely historical ones.²⁵ The only character who was not an abstraction of morality for at least some of the time was King John, the titular hero.²⁶

The play dealt with John's struggle against the rulers of the church as he tried to serve Widowe Yngelond.²⁷ John was depicted as "the morning star of the Reformation."²⁸ In creating such a figure, Bale deliberately contradicted Polydore Vergil's pro-Catholic view of John; he tried to manipulate the chronicles in support of political and religious doctrines which he believed to be of immediate advantage to England. Bale saw England threatened by civil disobedience masked as religion, and he wrote Kynge Johan to urge absolute obedience to the king who had restored true faith to the nation.²⁹

Kynge Johan was the first English history play. It was dedicated to the national glory of England. It attempted to reinterpret history in light of tenets which it accepted and, in turn, to use history to support its ideas. Furthermore, it used an event from the past to

²⁴Campbell, "Histories," p. 111.

²⁵Tillyard, p. 111.

²⁶Ribner, The English History Play, p. 37.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Reese, p. 69.

²⁹Ibid., p. 70.

illuminate a contemporary political problem.³⁰ In method, therefore, Kynge Johan was an isolated forerunner of The Mirror for Magistrates. It lacked artistic merit,³¹ but it contained the fundamental use of history which the Mirror popularized.

The impetus of the Mirror's method of using history bore immediate fruit. Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville teamed to write Gorboduc, the first English history play that was largely free from the abstractions of the morality play tradition. The play was first performed at the Inner Temple for a Christmas observance in 1561. Less than a month later, it was repeated at Whitehall in a performance before the Queen herself.³²

The story, borrowed from Geoffrey of Monmouth, tells how Gorboduc, King of Britain, decides in his old age to partition his kingdom between Ferrex and Porrex, his two sons. Mutual suspicions arise between them until Porrex murders his older brother. Porrex in turn is killed by the vengeful Queen Videna, his own mother. The Duke of Albany then attempts to take over the kingdom, and all of the main characters die in the ensuing civil war.³³

Norton and Sackville chose these events from early English history for a political purpose; they wanted to dramatize the dangers of an

³⁰Ribner, The English History Play, p. 39.

³¹Reese, p. 70.

³²Ribner, The English History Play, p. 41.

³³Reese, p. 71.

uncertain or a disputed succession,³⁴ using history to mirror the present and using tragedy to rehearse the disastrous results of political error.³⁵ This particular looking-glass was designed to reflect truth to no less a magistrate than Queen Elizabeth herself.³⁶ Allusions to the succession are gathered together in the final speech of the play, when Eubulus, the king's counsellor, comments on the action. He notes the disastrous state of the nation, because

No ruler rests within the regal seat;
The heir, to whom the sceptre longs, unknown,
(V, ii, 184-185)³⁷

Anarchy is the result of such a situation; therefore, the ruler has an awesome responsibility to choose a successor while he yet lives.

Anarchy, as Eubulus says,

doth grow, when, lo, unto the prince,
Whom death or sudden hap of life bereaves,
No certain heir remains, such certain heir
As not all only is the rightful heir
But to the realm is so made to be.
(V, ii, 247-250)³⁸

Here is Hall and the Mirror all over again. History repeats itself and the lessons of the past are important for guidance in the present.

In other ways Gorboduc affirms its place in the mainstream of Elizabethan historiography, blending humanistic and medieval traditions. The play affirms a divine plan that is beneficent and good for mankind; yet, it also declares man's control over his own destiny by his freedom

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Campbell, Mirror, p. 38.

³⁶Tillyard, p. 113.

³⁷John S. Farmer, editor, The Dramatic Writings of Richard Edwards, Thomas Norton, and Thomas Sackville (New York, 1966), p. 150.

³⁸Ibid., p. 152.

to choose or create an alternative plan. However, Gorboduc makes the assertion that when God's plan is unnecessarily and arbitrarily violated, man loses control over his subsequent fate.³⁹ So cause and effect are carefully worked out in the drama, and at the end the play maintains that God will restore order out of chaos.⁴⁰

The influence of Gorboduc was enormous in its day. It introduced blank verse to the stage, appropriating for drama an infinitely flexible rhythm. The play's regular construction brought classical form and exactness to the Elizabethan stage. Its five-act structure, chorus, and dumb show were influential on later playwrights who were interested in careful craftsmanship.⁴¹ Finally, "the authors of Gorboduc transferred to the dramatic medium and expressed in blank verse most of the ideas about history on which Shakespeare's History Plays were founded."⁴²

Between Gorboduc and Shakespeare, there developed a final influence which exercised the current ideas of history in literary form. This was the English chronicle play, a unique, native form of drama which was the most striking variety of an extensive and varied literary expression of the national spirit.⁴³ It developed in close relationship with the outburst of patriotic feeling which hurled itself against the Armada and which united England in a way that the country had never before been united.⁴⁴ This dramatic form was actually a fusion of the morality

³⁹Reese, p. 73.

⁴⁰Tillyard, p. 115.

⁴¹Reese, p. 74.

⁴²Tillyard, pp. 116-117.

⁴³Felix E. Schelling, Elizabethan Playwrights (New York, 1952), p. 107.

⁴⁴Schelling, Elizabethan Drama, I, 251.

play, the heroic drama, and the regularity (plus some stock devices) of the Senecan tradition.⁴⁵

It is difficult to define an Elizabethan chronicle or history play. Designated as histories are plays which, strictly speaking, could be called tragedies, including Richard II, Richard III, and Hamlet. On the other hand, plays like Henry V did not display tragic concepts. In addition, some plays contained factual history, while others dramatized stories from legends.⁴⁶

The definition of a chronicle play, then, cannot depend on form or historical fact. It must stand upon the purpose of the writer, for the genuine chronicle play involved the dramatic fulfillment of a specific philosophy of history which always regarded the past in view of current affairs.⁴⁷ Also, the material for the play was taken from a chronicle source that a large part of the original audience believed to be factual. The essential historicity was not changed, as far as the Elizabethan audience was concerned, if the dramatist altered the material so that it might give better service either to his doctrinal or to his dramatic purposes. Plays based on factual history which do not serve the legitimate Elizabethan aims of history are not history plays.⁴⁸ Thus, the true chronicle play "is simply a drama which

⁴⁵Ribner, The English History Play, p. 66.

⁴⁶Ford, pp. 20-21.

⁴⁷S. L. Bethell, Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition (Durham, N. C., 1944), p. 52.

⁴⁸Ribner, The English History Play, pp. 26-27.

purposed to accomplish on the stage the serious purposes of the Tudor historian in another area."⁴⁹

It might be helpful to summarize these purposes again.

Those stemming from classical and humanist philosophies of history include (1) a nationalistic glorification of England; (2) an analysis of contemporary affairs, both national and foreign so as to make clear the virtues and failings of contemporary statesmen; (3) a use of past events as a guide to political behavior in the present; (4) a use of history for political theory; and (5) a study of past political disaster as an aid to Stoical fortitude in the present. Those stemming from medieval Christian philosophy of history include: (6) illustration of the providence of God as the ruling force in human--and primarily political--affairs, and (7) exposition of a rational plan in human events which must affirm the wisdom and justice of God.⁵⁰

The highest form of the history play came out of the morality play, with its didactic and symbolic method and its plot formula of relating each event to the others so that a meaningful whole could be created.⁵¹ Important steps in the adaptation of the morality tradition to the dramatization of history were Kynge Johan, Gorboduc, and The Life and Death of Jack Straw (c. 1590). Looser in construction than Gorboduc and lacking its classical influences, Jack Straw contained several dramatic faults. The hero was not well defined, there were poor connections between scenes, and dramatic unity was scarcely existent. Nevertheless, the play began with the fundamental purpose of teaching the evils of rebellion. The unknown author had a clear idea of the function of history, and he tried to embody it in his play, even though he was dramatically unsuccessful.⁵²

⁴⁹Ford, p. 22.

⁵⁰Ribner, The English History Play, p. 26.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 31.

⁵²Ibid., pp. 75-76, 79.

Another tradition fused into the chronicle play was the influence of Senecan tragedy. This was introduced in Richardus Tertius (1579), a long-winded, fifteen-act drama written in Latin by Dr. Thomas Legge, Master of Caius College at Cambridge. The political message was the inevitability of the fall of tyranny, but the method and style of the play were essentially classical. There were no traces of the tradition of the moralities or of the heroic romances.⁵³

Legge obviously wrote a Senecan imitation, echoing lines from Seneca and shaping portions of the action to correspond to scenes from the Hercules Furens, the Hyppolytus, and the Troades. He chose the most obvious subject for a Senecan imitation in English history: the downfall of the tyrannical Richard III. More, Grafton, Hall, and Holinshed had all portrayed Richard in the role of a Senecan tyrant; More and Hall had even recorded long speeches for various historical figures connected with Richard, so all Legge had to do was follow his sources.⁵⁴

Richardus Tertius, however, was more than a mere imitation of Seneca. The play covered a wide scope, portraying much action with many characters. As a result, Legge was unable to preserve the Latin unities, and he did not retain the chorus, although he used a choric song to end each act. The result was a blending of the traditional form and devices of Senecan tragedy with something of the epic scope, episodic manner, and diversified manner of the English chronicles.⁵⁵

⁵³Reese, p. 78.

⁵⁴Ribner, The English History Play, pp. 68-69.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 69.

Evidently the play was very popular, for it was soon noticed beyond the walls of Cambridge. The play may well have produced a profound effect on its Cambridge audience and the younger dramatists who heard of it. At any rate, the influence of Senecan tragedy accompanied the history play as it developed. It may be clearly seen in The True Tragedy of Richard III, as well as in Shakespeare's Richard III.⁵⁶

A third tradition which helped to shape the English chronicle play was the heroic romance. The possibilities of this influence became apparent in The Famous Victories of Henry V, performed sometime before 1588. The heroic romance glorified a glamorous popular idol in loosely connected, episodic scenes. The Famous Victories was probably the first play in this tradition to draw its titular hero from actual history. The only serious historical purpose of the play, however, was patriotic vaunting, so The Famous Victories barely comes within the limits of our definition of the chronicle play. It remained for Tamburlaine to fully join the heroic tradition with the developing chronicle play.⁵⁷

Jack Straw, Richardus Tertius, and The Famous Victories epitomized the three dramatic traditions which made important contributions to the development of the history play. By 1594, when Robert Greene's Selimus was printed, the English chronicle play had definitely emerged as a recognizable genre. Jack Straw used many elements of the late morality play in a serious attempt to use the past to teach political lessons to the present. Richardus Tertius blended Senecan tragedy with history

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 70.

⁵⁷Ibid., pp. 72-73.

from the English chronicles. The Famous Victories was a non-didactic heroic romance that drew its hero from actual history.⁵⁸

Between these three plays and Shakespeare's early history plays lay the first experiments in the infant genre. Most of the authors before Shakespeare wrote in careless collaboration, with almost no concern for dramatic unity or future claims to authorship.⁵⁹ Their works were little more than series of poorly constructed and loosely connected scenes that dramatized the lives of legendary heroes or ancient British kings.⁶⁰ Such plays as Look About You, The Famous History of the Life and Death of Captain Thomas Stukely, and Peele's Edward I and The Battle of Alcazar followed in the steps of The Famous Victories; they contained scarcely a thought about history. It was the minority which exercised serious political and historical reflection.⁶¹ In addition characterization was weak and ineffectual, and there was much comic material which added nothing to the value of the plays.⁶²

Of course, there were exceptions, unusual dramas which helped to mature the chronicle play in a series of rising tides. Tamburlaine appeared in 1587, exploding with a dynamic force that transformed the dramatic poetry of the entire nation.⁶³ Tamburlaine was basically a

⁵⁸Ibid., pp. 66, 79-80.

⁵⁹Schelling, Elizabethan Drama, I, 267.

⁶⁰T. M. Parrott and R. H. Hall, A Short View of Elizabethan Drama (New York, 1943), p. 287.

⁶¹Tillyard, pp. 124, 126. ⁶²Ford, p. 30.

⁶³Schelling, Elizabethan Drama, I, 226.

heroic drama, but Marlowe took his hero from recent history. He also approached his subject with mature ideas about history, and he used his play to illustrate important political doctrine.⁶⁴ Marlowe's philosophy of history was drawn from humanist historians who wrote of Tamburlaine "as the ideal Renaissance prince, the symbol of virtu."⁶⁵ Explicit in this philosophy was a denial of the providence of God in human affairs. Marlowe's history was created by two things: a capricious and lawless fortune and a human will that could control fortune by man's wisdom and power.⁶⁶

Tamburlaine presented its hero in a series of episodic events,⁶⁷ with a mastery of phrase, a treasury of poetic imagery, and a "hardy exuberance."⁶⁸ The drama was written in the almost untried form of blank verse. Marlowe used it to build his "mighty line," and his astounding success with it firmly fixed it as the vehicle of subsequent serious drama.⁶⁹

The Troublesome Raigne of King John (published in 1591 but probably written about four years previously) was "a much more thoughtful and consistent play"⁷⁰ than Tamburlaine. This anonymous play examined the

⁶⁴Ribner, The English History Play, p. 63.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 64.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Schelling, Elizabethan Drama, I, 227.

⁶⁹William Vaughn Moody and Robert Morss Lovett, A History of English Literature, 8th ed. (New York, 1963), p. 103.

⁷⁰Reese, p. 82.

Tudor search for unity in light of the perilous conflict with Rome, clearly demonstrating the relationship of Elizabethan problems to its version of past history.⁷¹ The scenes of the play were episodic, and transitions were often poor. The central figure, John, progressed from one defeat to another. He was doomed to defeat because of his own insufficiency and weakness; but as he died, he prophesied that ultimate victory over Rome would be achieved by his descendants.⁷²

Many critics feel that Woodstock, a rather powerful piece of stage didacticism, is one of the best of chronicle dramas.⁷³ The unknown author depended on Shakespeare's Henry VI plays, but he produced a drama that was perhaps one of the two most completely developed chronicle plays (the second was Marlowe's Edward II) before Richard II.⁷⁴ He skillfully synthesized about fifteen years of history into an amazingly unified narrative. His picture of the self-indulgent Richard II was much closer to history than Shakespeare's later portrait. Also, in his portrayal of the elevation of Richard's flatterers, the crushing burden of the black charter device, and the murder of Gloucester, the dramatist pinpointed the real causes of Richard's downfall, causes that Shakespeare later passed over lightly.⁷⁵ He accomplished this in spite of the fact that he took great liberty with historical fact.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Kibner, The English History Play, p. 85.

⁷³Keese, p. 84.

⁷⁴Kibner, The English History Play, pp. 136, 145.

⁷⁵Tucker Brooke, pp. 328-329.

deliberately rearranging and reinterpreting the content of his sources to produce a coherent plot that had a distinct political message.⁷⁶

The author of Woodstock had other skills. His ability in writing prose and his talent for creating scenes of comic relief were two qualities which set him apart from his contemporaries. He also exhibited a gift for developing character. In the character of Thomas of Woodstock, the author created a comprehensive and convincing figure who became a tragic hero rivaling Edward II or Richard II.⁷⁷ As a poet this unknown dramatist was negligible, for his verse rarely rose above the pedestrian, but he did understand how to construct a drama out of the raw material found in the chronicles. As a shaping influence on the chronicle play, he was of primary importance.⁷⁸

The highest peak of the chronicle play before Shakespeare's greatest histories was the production in 1591-1592 of Edward II.⁷⁹ Marlowe abandoned the episodic treatment of earlier chronicle plays, making each incident contribute to the play's total effect, which was concentrated in Edward's downfall. Thus, Edward II marked the first time that all of the elements in an English chronicle play were completely integrated.⁸⁰

⁷⁶Ribner, The English History Play, pp. 137-139.

⁷⁷Tucker Brooke, p. 329.

⁷⁸Ribner, The English History Play, p. 145.

⁷⁹Hazleton Spencer, editor, Elizabethan Plays (Boston, 1933), p. 102.

⁸⁰Ribner, The English History Play, p. 135.

It is obvious that when Shakespeare arrived in London, there already existed a clear conception of the nature and uses of history. The historical ideas expounded by Hall and The Mirror for Magistrates were not the exclusive property of a few educated Elizabethans. Additionally, there was a developing dramatic tradition which expressed these ideas.

The interplay of moral forces; the nurse of statesmen and a mirror to contemporary life; a storehouse of examples; the study of the self-determining individual; a spur to patriotic emulation and endeavour; a demonstration of God's providence: Tudor history, dramatic and non-dramatic, could be all or any of these things, and the writer was free to alter the details to serve his didactic intent. Such, in the field of history, was Shakespeare's artistic inheritance.⁸¹

⁸¹Reese, p. 88.

CHAPTER V

THE SOURCES OF KING JOHN

John Dover Wilson has stated firmly that in writing King John Shakespeare closely followed The Troublesome Raigne of King John and used no other source.¹ Other critics, most recently including Julia Van de Water,² have agreed with this conclusion, but such opinions may not give Shakespeare enough credit as a researcher.

E. A. J. Honigmann, while trying to prove that King John was written between the winter of 1590 and the spring of 1591, has recently presented evidence for several other possible sources. In fact, Honigmann's basic argument is that Shakespeare's King John rather than The Troublesome Raigne is the original;³ he sees The Troublesome Raigne as a corrupted version of Shakespeare's play, written within a few months of its supposed original. While Honigmann's arguments on this point are unconvincing, they do, naturally, lead to a search for other possible sources for Shakespeare's play; and Honigmann indicates that

¹Wilson, p. xxxiv.

²Julia Van de Water, "The Bastard in King John," Shakespeare Quarterly, XI (October, 1960), 137.

³William Shakespeare, King John, edited by E. A. J. Honigmann (London, 1954), pp. lvii-lviii. All subsequent quotations from King John are from this edition.

in addition to The Troublesome Raigne, Shakespeare used at least two English chronicles and three Latin ones.⁴

An examination of these sources should reveal the origin of Shakespeare's facts and also show how he used his sources, thus giving some valuable hints as to his dramatic purposes in King John. Before looking at the usually accepted sources, it would be well to review the history of John's reign as recorded in all the chronicles published by the 1590's to find the facts known to the age. A survey of Elizabethan opinion of John will be helpful, for the generally accepted ideas of his audience certainly affected the way Shakespeare used his sources.

John became king in 1199. His reign divides into three periods, each of which involves a different problem that John faced. The first four years of his rule were mainly concerned with his attempts to establish his right to the throne. Arthur of Brittany, the son of his older brother Geoffrey, claimed the right to rule, and was protected by King Philip, but the conflict was terminated by a peace treaty. The main terms of the treaty were John's surrender to Philip of much English territory in France and the marriage of Blanche, John's niece, to Louis the Dauphin. The peace was short-lived, however, for in 1202 Philip again made demands in behalf of Arthur. This led to John's invasion of France, the capture of Arthur, and the latter's mysterious death in 1203.⁵

⁴Ibid., p. xi.

⁵Geoffrey Bullough, Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare (New York, 1962), IV, 9-10; Campbell, "Histories," pp. 133-134.

The second period of John's reign is delineated by the problem of his conflict with Pope Innocent III, which began in 1205 with a dispute concerning the Archbishopric of Canterbury. The Pope rejected two rival candidates for the office and appointed a third person, Stephen Langton--whom John refused to accept because of Langton's sympathies with the French. In the ensuing quarrel the Pope excommunicated John and in 1208 placed England under interdict; finally, in 1212, Innocent III invited Philip to dispossess the determined Englishman. Faced with foreign invasion and domestic dissatisfaction, John capitulated at the Feast of the Ascension in 1213. He handed over his crown to the papal legate and after five days received it back as if from the Pope. In the eyes of many, this act fulfilled the prophecy of Peter the hermit that at Ascensiontide John would be thrown out of his kingdom.⁶

John's reconciliation with the Pope left him scant breathing space before a third problem arose. His barons revolted against him and forced him to sign Magna Carta in 1215. When they saw that John was not keeping his promises made in Magna Carta, they appealed to Philip, who promised to make Louis their next king. The pope then excommunicated all who rebelled against John. Louis, defying excommunication, invaded England. Melun, a dying Frenchman, warned the rebellious nobles that the Dauphin intended to conquer England; but when John died from poison in 1216, the outcome was uncertain. Peace finally came in 1218

⁶Bullough, IV, 10; Campbell, "Histories," p. 135.

after the battle of Lincoln and the destruction of a fleet of French supply ships by Hubert de Burgh.⁷

Such is the history of John's reign as the chronicles recorded it.⁸ Both the anonymous author of The Troublesome Raigne and Shakespeare followed it in its main outline. However, both of them condensed the history of John's reign for presentation on the stage. In so doing, they violated historical fact and blended together John's three main problems, making the death of Arthur (1203) the immediate reason for the barons' rebellion (1216) and causing both to occur just prior to John's surrendering of the crown (1213).⁹

The explanation for this divergence from actual history lies in the Elizabethan custom of manipulating the facts of history to teach lessons of interest to their contemporaries. For this reason, to the absolute bewilderment of many of the critics, neither author mentioned Magna Carta. There was no need to, for it was not until the Stuart kings that the document reentered the mainstream of English legal thought. The plays do mention Arthur because he represents symbolically the problems created for England by the Catholic queen of Scotland, Mary Stuart.¹⁰

⁷Bullough, IV, 10.

⁸For modern opinion on the difficulties on the reign of John, see Helen Cam, England Before Elizabeth (London, 1950), and Austin Lane Poole, From Doomsday Book to Magna Carta, Vol. III of The Oxford History of England, edited by G. N. Clark, 15 vols. (Oxford, 1951).

⁹Bullough, IV, 10.

¹⁰Campbell, "Histories," pp. 141-142.

Indeed, for years both Protestants and Catholics had argued about the conflicts between the Tudors and the Pope in terms of the struggles of John's reign. In 1533 Henry VIII had likened his task to John's. Two years later, when a priest was prosecuted for treason, one of the charges against him was that he had prayed for Henry's death to be like that of John. In fact, a body of politically-inspired, pseudo-historical literature was published about that time, all demonstrating the opposition of the clergy to Henry, some of it with reference to the Catholic opposition to John.¹¹

In the light of these and other comparisons between John and Henry, the chronicles were quickly revised to conform to the new and official Tudor version of John's reign. John's new image made him popular as a Protestant martyr and a heroic king.¹² His reputation was further enhanced by Bale's Kynge Johan, composed around 1536.

This comparison between John and the Tudors continued into Elizabeth's day. In 1569 John Leslie, Bishop of Ross, used Arthur as the historical basis of his argument for Mary's right of succession. He contended that Richard I had designated Arthur as the heir apparent and that John was a usurper.¹³ The implications for Elizabeth were obvious.

Two years later, after the Northern Rebellion, King John was again used as a mirror of Elizabethan affairs in the famous Homilie against

¹¹John R. Elliot, "Shakespeare and the Double Image of King John," Shakespeare Studies (Cincinnati, 1965), I, 66.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Campbell, "Histories," pp. 142-143.

Disobedience and Wylfull Rebellion. It was added to the Book of Homilies, a periodic reading of which was required in all churches.¹⁴

This particular homily is important because it represents "the official acceptance of John as a proper mirror for Elizabethan England"¹⁵

The citation of a part of it will suggest the official attitude:

And to use one example of our owne countrey: The Byshop of Rome dyd pyke a quarell to kyng John of Englande, about the election of Steven Langton to the bishoprike of Canterburie, wherein the kyng had auncient ryght, . . . the Byshop of Rome having no right, but had begun then to usurpe upon the kynes of Englande, and all other Christian kinges, as they had before done against their soveraigne lords the Emperours: procedyng even by the same wayes and meanes, and likewise cursing kyng John, and discharging his subjects of their othe of fidelitie unto their soveraigne lorde. Nowe had Englishmen at that tyme knowen their dutie to their prince set forth in Gods worde, woulde a great meanie of the nobles, and other Englishmen, naturall subjectes, for this soveraigne and unnatural usurper his curse of the kyng and for his fayned discharging of them of their othe of fidelitie to their naturall lorde, . . . have rebelled against their soveraigne lord the kyng? Woulde Englishe subjects have taken part against the kyng of Englande, and against Englishmen, with the Frenche king and Frenchmen, being incensed against this Realme by the byshop of Rome? . . . would they have driven their naturall Soveraigne Lorde the king of Englande to such extremitie, that he was inforced to submit him selfe unto that forraine false usurper, the byshop of Rome . . .?¹⁶

This official attitude was taken up by other adherents of the anti-Catholic cause. In 1584 Anthony Munday issued his Watch-Woord to Englande, in which he said,

Let vs deale but with our selues, and with our owne feeling, knowledge, and memorie. The accursing of King John: the receuying him vassail: the making his Realme subiect and feudatorie to the Pope: the arming his Subiects against him: the poysoning of him at length: the giuing the Land to the French Kinges sonne: the

¹⁴Ibid., p. 143; Honigmann, p. xxvi.

¹⁵Campbell, "Histories," p. 143.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 143-144.

inuading thereof by the Dolphin of Fraunce: his so long possessing a great part of it. The rebellion of the Barons to take the French mens part: all the mischeefes that fell in all this whyle, were they not the good workes of Popes and Papistes?¹⁷

The author of the Raigne accepted this explanation of John's troubles. In fact, he attempted to modernize Bale's picture of John as a pre-Reformation adversary of papal power and church abuses. His purpose was to use John's reign as a mirror in which his audience could see the perils of domestic dissension and foreign intervention. After consulting several authorities, he organized his material to draw parallels between the reigns of John, Henry VIII, and Elizabeth.¹⁸

In doing this, he constructed his play from a largely theological viewpoint. His plot was organized with the religious argument in mind.¹⁹ The play had a violent partisan spirit, emphasizing "the evils of papal rule and its antagonism to a vital nationality."²⁰ One of its purposes was to show how closely national solidarity was tied to opposition to Rome, demonstrating that John's yielding to the priesthood had produced deadly strife and invasion.²¹

The result of his labor was a two-part play consisting of a series of scenes loosely tied together by chronological sequence. There was no organic unity, no all-encompassing dramatic idea. The author's primary

¹⁷Honigmann, p. xxvii.

¹⁸Bullough, IV, 6, 9.

¹⁹F. J. Furnivall and John Monroe, editors, "The Troublesome Reign of King John": Being the Original of Shakespeare's "Life and Death of King John" (New York, 1913), p. xxiii.

²⁰Hiram Corson, "King John," Shakespeariana, IV (February, 1887), 51.

²¹Furnivall and Monroe, p. xxiii.

purpose was political, not dramatic; thus, his patriotic expression overrode dramatic considerations. The plotless string of events did have various sets of scenes which shared common dramatic focal points, but "the faint attempt to give dramatic substance to the central opposition of England to France, or of Protestantism to Catholicism" was extremely ineffectual.²²

Shakespeare condensed the two parts of The Troublesome Raigne into a single five-act play, rewriting the older play line by line, changing the emphasis, and developing the characters.²³ He suppressed that which was trite and unfitting, and he infused a spirit of poetry which the original play never possessed.²⁴ While he covered the same events, Shakespeare not only changed the style but also added items that gave the play a new topicality. He expanded the first part of the Raigne from 1840 to 1987 lines, but he reduced the second part from 1196 lines to 728.²⁵ In addition, he improved the handling of the parts, introduced a broader philosophical outlook, improved the dialogue, and arranged the play to produce an effective climax.²⁶

It is generally believed that Shakespeare's play was not the original. The nature of Shakespeare's divergences supports this idea. Often King John sounds like a commentary on the Raigne, alluding to its

²²H. B. Charlton, Shakespearean Tragedy (Cambridge, 1961), p. 64.

²³Craig, p. 83.

²⁴Schelling, Elizabethan Drama, I, 274.

²⁵Bullough, IV, 5.

²⁶Furnivall and Monroe, p. xxx.

material or effects, but not repeating them, and at the same time putting the emphasis in another place.²⁷ Thus, in the area of technical craftsmanship, Shakespeare gained dramatic superiority over his predecessor.

Another area in which Shakespeare made changes was in the tone of the play. Shakespeare suppressed the vociferous, anti-Roman spirit of the Raigne. He omitted a scene in which Faulconbridge ransacked a monastery, finding a nun in the abbot's chest and Friar Laurence in a nun's cupboard. He even omitted the dying John's speech prophesying a descendant who would tramp down Rome. Instead, Shakespeare filled King John with the vivid patriotism of Elizabethan defiance of both foreigner and Pope--but defiance of the Pope as a foreign power, not as a religious leader. The spirit that permeates King John is nationalistic and patriotic, not religious,²⁸ even though religious issues are very much a part of the play.

Shakespeare also made changes in characterization, even though the main characters of the Raigne were already vigorously sketched.²⁹ King John becomes "a subtle and somewhat baffling character."³⁰ Faulconbridge develops into a strong individual from his rather inconsistent part in the Raigne. (Specific changes in John and Faulconbridge will be noted in succeeding chapters.) Pandulph's somewhat sinister wisdom is

²⁷Bullough, IV, 22.

²⁸Corson, pp. 52-53.

²⁹Furnivall and Monroe, p. xxii.

³⁰Stanley T. Williams, editor, The Life and Death of King John (New Haven, 1927), p. 120.

carefully elaborated. Salisbury has been made the spokesman for a group of rather indistinguishable barons. Also, Hubert's rough manhood is sympathetically presented.³¹

Perhaps the most important of Shakespeare's changes, however, was in his emphasis. In the opening speeches of the Raigne, there is the implication that John has inherited the throne from his brother in natural succession.³² In King John the action begins with a direct emphasis on John's "borrowed majesty," and everything in the play is based upon John's defective right to the English crown,³³ not on John's opposition to the Pope.

Honigmann mysteriously calls the usurpation of John "Shakespeare's fiction, for his [John's] 'right' is not seriously questioned in the chronicles."³⁴ Honigmann has evidently forgotten Polydore Vergil's Anglia Historia, in which Vergil even intensified the hostility of the Catholic chroniclers towards John. He mentioned Richard's wills, but he entirely omitted Richard's bequest of the crown to John. Thus, Vergil concludes that John defrauded Arthur, the rightful heir, of the English kingdom. Contrary to recorded history, he even wrote that many English nobles were amazed at John's treatment of his nephew.³⁵

This older view of John's reign was changed by the Tudor chronicles, but it did not die out. John Stowe, in his Annales (1580),

³¹Furnivall and Monroe, p. ix. ³²Reese, p. 268.

³³Brandes, 169.

³⁴Honigmann, p. xxvii.

³⁵John R. Elliot, "Polydore Vergil and the Reputation of King John in the Sixteenth Century," English Language Notes, II (December, 1964), 90-91.

plainly accused John of disinheriting Arthur. He stated that the succession belonged to the elder brother's son, not to John.³⁶ Therefore, it is obvious that Shakespeare did not invent John's usurpation; he knew of the older view of John's reign from reading either Vergil or other Elizabethan historians.³⁷

This fact changes the entire center of gravity in Shakespeare's play. He deliberately avoided the generally accepted Tudor view of John in the Raigne, even omitting its hint that Arthur was not old enough to rule.³⁸ Instead, he introduced Vergil's more unpopular view, telling us that he is concerned with more than the story of The Troublesome Raigne. It implies a carefulness of study in King John that is usually denied to Shakespeare by his critics.

In addition to The Troublesome Raigne, there is evidence that Shakespeare consulted other sources in writing King John. Since his main source for his other English history plays was Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland (1587),³⁹ it would not be surprising to discover a number of verbal similarities between King John and Holinshed.⁴⁰

Besides the verbal likenesses, King John sometimes follows the action of Holinshed more closely than that of the Raigne. For example, in the part regarding Melun, King John had Melun crossing the English

³⁶Ibid., p. 91.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Arthur Temple Cadoux, Shakespearean Selves (London, 1938), p. 18.

³⁹Schelling, Elizabethan Drama, I, 111.

⁴⁰Honigmann, p. xii.

Channel before Lewis so that he could encourage the English nobles (King John, IV, iii, 15-17, following Holinshed⁴¹). The Raigne omits this incident. Again, in his dying speech Melun informs the barons that the Dauphin plans to repay their treachery with more treachery (King John, V, iv, 37-38). Holinshed likewise reports in Melun's closing speech that Lewis considers the barons to be traitors.⁴² The Raigne presents the French in the act of planning the coup (II, iii, 37-38), but omits any reference to the treachery of the English nobles in Melun's speech (II, v, 1-47).⁴³

Since religious issues are very important in the play, Shakespeare probably turned to John Foxe's Actes and Monuments, the outstanding work by England's leading church historian. Several incidents suggest Shakespeare's use of Foxe. In the material concerning Peter of Pomfret, Shakespeare's wording is somewhat closer to Foxe's than to that in the Raigne. Moreover, the Raigne (I, xiii, 183-187) goes along with Holinshed (180, i, ii) in having Peter himself announce John's deposition to the king; both King John (IV, ii, 147-152) and The Actes report Peter publishing his dangerous prophecy before coming to John, and only Foxe and Shakespeare mention that the entire kingdom was disturbed by the resulting rumors.⁴⁴

Also, when John submits to the Pope in Foxe, he takes the crown off his head and says, "Here I resign up the crown of the realm of England to the pope's hands, Innocent III" ⁴⁵ Foxe continues the

⁴¹Holinshed, II, 329.

⁴²Ibid., II, 334.

⁴³Honigmann, p. xiii.

⁴⁴Ibid., pp. xiii-xiv.

⁴⁵John Foxe, The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe, 3rd ed., edited by Rev. Josiah Pratt (London, 1870), II, 332.

narrative, stating that later John was forced "to receive it [the crown] again of him at the hands of another cardinal"46 The Raigne shows Pandulph ordering John to give up the crown (II, ii, 205), but the surrender is not presented. Pandulph is later shown giving back the crown to John (II, iv, 1-5). King John seems to be verbally echoing Foxe when John says, "Thus have I yielded up into your power/The circle of my glory" (V, i, 1-2). In fact, Pandulph's entire mission to John more clearly follows Foxe than it does Holinshed.⁴⁷

Another place where Shakespeare seems to follow Foxe is in the description of the death of John's poisoner. In the 1583 edition Foxe has a woodcut of the incident with the caption, "The monke lyeth here burst of the poyson."⁴⁸ King John also has "A monk . . ./Whose bowels suddenly burst out . . ." (V, vi, 29-30). The Raigne (II, viii, 41-143) attributes a similar death to John, but it does not describe the dead poisoner.⁴⁹ Also, the very name "Swinstead Abbey" in King John (V, iii, 8) follows Foxe's "Swinsted,"⁵⁰ not Holinshed's "Swineshead."⁵¹

A third possible source used by Shakespeare is Matthew Paris' Historia Maior (1571). In the incident where the flood destroys John's carriages, Paris has "a fluctibus deuoratis"⁵²; King John reads, "Devoured by the unexpected flood" (V, vii, 64); the Raigne (II, vii, 36-41) has John "overwhelmed" by the tide. Paris and Shakespeare report

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 333.

⁴⁷Honigmann, pp. iv, xx.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. xiv.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. xx.

⁵¹Holinshed, II, 336.

⁵²Honigmann, pp. xv-xvi.

the disaster itself to be "unexpected," while the Raigne makes the news "unexpected" (II, vii, 42). Paris has "vix elapsus,"⁵³ and King John reads "hardly have escaped," but the Raigne (II, vi, 53), like Holinshed,⁵⁴ merely reads "escapt." Also Shakespeare twice explains that it was at night when the floods came, as Paris implies. The Raigne (II, vi, 46), however, says that it was morning. In describing this event Foxe and Holinshed are briefer than Paris,⁵⁵ and neither records the verbal parallels mentioned above.⁵⁶

Again, when the English nobles receive Lewis, Shakespeare seems to be walking in Paris' steps. Holinshed⁵⁷ condensed the account in Paris, and in doing so, he omitted several points common to Paris and Shakespeare. Paris describes "Barones lachrymantes & lamentations,"⁵⁸ and King John has Salisbury weeping (V, ii, 45-59), but in the parallel scene in Holinshed⁵⁹ and the Raigne (II, iii), the lament of the nobles is completely omitted. In addition, both Shakespeare and Paris apostrophize England, and both use the image of stars to express the idea of servitude.⁶⁰ Therefore, it again appears that Shakespeare used more than one source in writing King John.

Another possible source is Ralph Coggeshall's Latin chronicle. A marginal note in Holinshed credits Coggeshall with being the principle

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Holinshed, II, 335.

⁵⁵Foxe, II, 342; Holinshed, II, 335.

⁵⁶Honigmann, p. xvi.

⁵⁷Holinshed, II, 331.

⁵⁸Honigmann, pp. xvi-xvii.

⁵⁹Holinshed, II, 321.

⁶⁰Honigmann, p. xvii.

source of the attempted blinding of Arthur. Shakespeare seems to follow this authority in King John. Also, as far as scholars can determine, only in the Latin Wakefield Chronicle could Shakespeare have learned that the first day of April was the date of Queen Eleanor's death.⁶¹

The number and the variety of these "coincidental" similarities and verbal echoes convince us that they are not coincidence. They all point in one direction: that Shakespeare did not hurriedly rewrite The Troublesome Raigne as a theatrical chore; that he was aware of contemporary opinion about John; that he deliberately chose to present an older and less popular picture of the monarch; that he carefully sought out sources besides the Raigne for additional information about his subject.

In other words, Shakespeare was carefully carrying out his own historical and dramatic purposes. He rewrote the Raigne to fit his own concepts of John's reign and of its relevancy to Elizabethan politics. He read other sources to round out his knowledge of the period, and he used them as he revitalized the Raigne. How successful he was in achieving his ends we shall see in the following chapters.

⁶¹Ibid.

CHAPTER VI

JOHN AS HERO

Of all of the problems relating to the controversy about the play's unity, the question of the hero has probably been the most debated. Many critics have found no hero in the play; some think that Faulconbridge fills the role; and a few accept John as the hero, even though they condemn his lack of color.¹ The next three chapters will consider three different possible heroes. Each chapter will examine a reading of the play based upon a particular identification of the hero in a search for a figure who will unify the underlying themes of the play.

With John as the hero we would have a rewriting of the earlier play with no essential change in emphasis. In The Troublesome Raigne, John is the rightful king of England. King Philip of France challenges John's right in behalf of John's nephew Arthur, Duke of Brittain. Arthur, "Who is but yong, and yet unmette to raigne," (I; iv, 89)² is presented as a mere boy whose claim to England is pressed by his proud mother, Constance. John answers the challenge by swiftly bringing

¹Honigmann, p. lxviii.

²All citations from The Troublesome Raigne are from the text found in Bullough because of its modern printing. The scene divisions and line numbers come from Charles Praetorius, editor, The Troublesome Raigne of John, King of England, 2 volumes (London, 1888), a facsimile by photolithography of the original text in the Capell collection at Trinity College, Cambridge.

an army to France to defend the town of Angiers, which Philip besieges. He defies Philip to his face; and when the crafty citizens of Angiers refuse to acknowledge anyone's right until it is proved, John leads his army into combat against the French.

An indecisive battle leads the citizens of Angiers to propose the marriage of John's niece Blanche to Philip's son Lewis. The principal parties agree, John giving Blanche for her dowry all English possessions on the continent except the city of Angiers.

In the midst of the wedding festivities in The Raigne Pandulph arrives, pronounces John accursed, and demands that Philip make war on England. When John defies the Pope's claim to authority over England, Philip--absolved from his new peace treaty with England--agrees to fight for the Pope. In the ensuing battle Austria is killed, Arthur is captured, and France is defeated. Then John returns to England. He sends a message to Hubert to put out Arthur's eyes, but the youngster reasons Hubert out of the deed by arguing that Hubert will lose his soul to Satan if he carries out John's order; since John's command is wrong, Hubert must bear the blame for executing it.

As John concludes his second coronation, the noblemen ask for Arthur's release; but John refuses, saying:

I will not buy your favours with my feare:
Nay, murmur not, my will is law enough,
I love you well, but if I lovde you better,
I would not buy it with my discontent.

(I, xiii, 203-206)

Hubert enters and reports that Arthur died an hour after he had been blinded. The barons leave in horror, refusing to stay with John and share his

guilt. John bemoans his loss of support and turns on Hubert for killing Arthur. Then Hubert confesses that Arthur is alive, and John sends him to bring back the nobles.

The second part of the Raigne opens with Arthur's leap from the walls and his death. The lords find his body and immediately blame John. Hubert arrives and pleads his innocence. Salisbury sends him away; but noting the warmth of the corpse, he assumes that John commanded someone else to kill Arthur. The nobles then, without any real justification, agree to invite Lewis to claim the throne. They separate, each one pledging to summon his allies to join against John in support of Lewis.

Faulconbridge reports this last development to John, who enumerates his problems in despair. He sends Faulconbridge to plead his case with the barons. Then he feels forced to submit to Pandulph for the sake of England, to prevent a foreigner from becoming king. In his soliloquy he decides:

Then John there is no way to keepe thy Crowne,
 But finely to dissemble with the Pope:
 That hand that gave the wound must give the salve
 To cure the hurt, els quite incurable.
 Thy sinnes are farre too great to be the man
 T' abolish Pope, and Popery from thy Realme:
 But in thy Seate, if I may gesse at all,
 A king shall raigne that shall suppresse them all.
 Peace John, here comes the Legate of the Pope,
 Dissemble thou, and whatsoere thou saist,
 Yet with thy heart wish their confusion.

(II, ii, 165-175)

Faulconbridge meets with the nobles at St. Edmondsbury to dissuade them from their purpose of making Lewis King of England. From his

speech to them it is evident that John is the unquestioned, anointed King of England and that the barons are unlawfully opposed to him in their selfish rebellion. He admonishes them:

Ayd Lewes, leave God, kill John, please hell,
 Make havock of the welfare of your soules,
 For heere I leave you in the sight of heaven,
 A troupe of traytors, food for hellish feends;
 If you desist, then follow me as friends,
 If not, then doo your worst as hatefull traytors.
 For Lewes his right, alas tis too too lame,
 A senselesse clayme, if truth be titles friend.
 (II, iii, 127-134)

The nobles refuse to return to John, and as a result both John and Lewis consider them to be traitors. They, not John, are villainous in their actions.

John's peace with Rome does not solve his problems, however. When Pandulph tells Lewis of John's submission and demands his withdrawal from England, the Dauphin accuses John of usurping his own right to the English throne; he ignores Pandulph's resulting curse and prepares to fight John for the mastery of England.

Seeing that his gambit has failed, John curses himself for his submission to the legate:

Accursed John, the divell owes thee shame,
 Resisting Rome, or yeelding to the Pope, alls one.
 The divell take the Pope, the Peeres, and Fraunce:
 Shame be my share for yeelding to the Priest.
 (II, iv, 73-76)

The play nevertheless ends in triumph for John. Melun is mortally wounded in the consequent battle, and as he dies he confesses Lewis' planned treachery against the English nobles. Pembroke bemoans the

frenzy that made them ally themselves to Lewis, and Salisbury announces his intention to "Kneele for pardon to our Sovereigne John" (II, v, 63).

John leaves the battlefield with a fever and is poisoned at Swineshead Abbey. The dying king attributes his troubles to his submission to Rome. He prophesies a descendant who will tread down the pride of Rome. Then he dies, a martyr for his long opposition to Rome's temporal claims.

The returning nobles and John's son, Prince Henry, enter as the king expires. The Dauphin decides that there is no power that can defeat England unless some party in the realm aids the invader. The play ends with the crowning of King Henry, and England is saved from foreign domination.

The John of the Raigne is thus the traditional hero of the accepted Tudor view of English history. He is forced to give up his crown to Pandulph to save the nation from servitude to France. He bravely fights Lewis until the nobles come to realize that Lewis' treachery matches their own. From that point on, the Dauphin's cause in England is doomed. Thus, John dies a hero's death, murdered by a Catholic monk, but ending his life in defiance of the enemies of his kingdom.

This is the play with John as the hero, but Shakespeare did not write it. Shakespeare chose to write about the same events, but with another John, a more sinister and deceitful character. The titular figure of King John, as we noted in the previous chapter, begins as a usurper. Not only is John immediately accused of being a usurper, but even his mother concedes that his possession of the throne depends on "Your strong possession much more than your right" (I, i, 40).

Shakespeare thus chose to illustrate John's moral illegitimacy; in the Raigne, only the enemies of England accuse John of usurping Arthur's right.

Notwithstanding this blemish on his reign, Shakespeare's John does begin as a vigorous leader and an able soldier. He arrives in France "with a speed that disconcerts his enemies, and the fact that he is followed by a brave 'choice of dauntless spirits' shows that he can attract supporters to his cause."³ We must necessarily reject Edward Dowden's conclusion that John's early display of royal dignity and strength is nothing more than "a poor pretence of true regal strength and honour."⁴ John is "every inch a king" in the first half of King John.

He defies King Philip before Angiers and demands entrance into the city as the lawful king of England. His argument is that the crown proves kingship. By not insisting that he is the rightful king of England, John lets us know that Philip's evaluation of his claim is accurate; nevertheless, when the shrewd citizens of Angiers announce that they will acknowledge him who proves to be king, John quickly declares war on France.

Again, when Pandulph, in the name of the Pope, demands to know why John has refused to allow Stephen Langton to be the Archbishop of Canterbury, John answers forcefully:

³Boas, p. 240.

⁴Edward Dowden, Shakespeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art (New York, 1967), p. 170.

Tell him this tale; and from the mouth of England
 Add thus much more, that no Italian priest
 Shall tithe or toll in our dominions;
 But as we, under God, are the supreme head,
 So under Him that great supremacy,
 Where we do reign, we will alone uphold
 Without th' assistance of a mortal hand:
 So tell the pope, all reverence set apart
 To him and his usurp'd authority.

(III, i, 78-86)⁵

Then, as a reluctant Philip bows before Pandulph's threats and breaks the newly made peace treaty, John thunders: "France, thou shall rue this hour within this hour" (III, i, 249).⁶

In the resulting battle John reaches his height in the play. France is defeated and Arthur is captured. John's troubles should be over, but he no sooner reaches his zenith than he begins to fall. So far he has indeed been a hero, but Shakespeare now shows us a vicious side of his character, one that has previously been hidden. John begins to deteriorate--first as a man and then as a king. His unraveling comes "partly through defects in himself that swiftly become apparent, and partly through the working of the Shakespearean misticque that decreed that usurpers would not prosper."⁷

The John of the Raigne also falls, but his fall is seen to result from his submission to papal authority. Excuses are made for his mistakes, and he dies a hero. Shakespeare's John is the king described by Holinshed and Polydore Vergil. No excuses are offered for his mistakes; they are deliberate political decisions made by a man of craven spirit.

⁵Honigmann's scene division. Most editors have III, i, 152-160.

⁶Most editors have III, i, 323.

⁷Reese, p. 273.

With France defeated and Rome thwarted, England is safe again, and John now turns his attention to making his crown equally secure. His dominant passion is to keep that which he has unjustly acquired. For this cause any wrong seems right--justice, honor, pity, or conscience to the contrary.⁸ Beginning with his timid instructions to Hubert in III, iii, John reveals himself to be morally irresponsible. He is only concerned with political consequences. The John of the Raigne speaks in riddles, but this John gives unambiguous orders: Arthur must die.⁹ Now we begin to see John as an evil figure, but without the courage to be a genuine villain.¹⁰ He shows he does not rule by a clear title "nor, like Bolingbroke, by warrant of the right of the strongest."¹¹

John next appears on the stage (IV, ii) with his nobles immediately after his second coronation. The suspicious barons complain about John's re-crowning, and the king appears to have regained his old form:

Some reasons of this double coronation
 I have possess'd you with, and think them strong;
 And more, more strong than lesser is my fear,
 I shall endue you with: meantime but ask
 What you would have performed that is not well,
 And well shall you perceive how willingly
 I will both hear and grant you your requests.
 (IV, ii, 40-46)

The barons respond by asking for Arthur's freedom, and as Hubert enters John replies:

Let it be so: I do commit his youth
 To your direction. Hubert, what news with you?
 (IV, ii, 67-68)

⁸Stopford Brooke, pp. 236-237. ⁹Reese, p. 273.

¹⁰Stobart, pp. 40-41.

¹¹Dowden, p. 169.

This is a choice example of John's duplicity in action. As Hubert arrives John assumes that his errand has been carried out, and of course he may answer the nobles favorably, appearing to grant their request. Hubert confirms his assumption in a quick aside, and then the king innocently says to the barons:

We cannot hold mortality's strong hand;
 Good lords, although my will to give is living,
 The suit which you demand is gone and dead:
 He tells us Arthur is deceas'd to-night.
(IV, ii, 82-85)

The noblemen are not deceived, however. They accuse John of foul play and depart in anger.

Immediately thereafter a messenger enters to inform the king that the French army has landed on English soil and that Eleanor has died. Then Faulconbridge brings in Peter of Pomfret and tells of his prophecy. John is here assailed on every side: on the emotional plane, his mother is dead; on the political, the barons are full of ire and a foreign invader lands his troops; and on the spiritual, a prophet has told the people that before noon on Ascension Day John will deliver up his crown. It is time to see the fiber of which this king is made.

As Hubert imprisons Peter, John sends Faulconbridge on an errand to bring the nobles back to him. He says enigmatically:

I have a way to win their loves again;
 Bring them before me.
(IV, ii, 168-169)

We will explain this puzzling statement momentarily, but we need to mark it now. Faced with a multitude of problems, John does not rise. He is

no longer lord of his presence. It is almost as if he were "struck by a moral paralysis for killing Arthur."¹²

Of course, Arthur is not yet dead, but John believes him to be dead and calculates accordingly. Since the king's interests now need a living Arthur, "John adds to his crime the baseness of a miserable attempt by chicanery and timorous sophisms to transfer the responsibility of murder from himself to his instrument and accomplice."¹³ The unbelievable tirade which he levels at Hubert convinces us that John is indeed an evil man who is increasingly unable to function as a king. Upon Hubert's confession that Arthur is still alive, John quickly sends him to recall the disturbed peers to their former obedience. The nature of his rapid response shows that, as usual, expediency is the primary factor with which he is concerned.

The next time that John appears on the stage he gives his crown to Pandulph and receives it back again as a vassal of the Pope. The crown scarcely rests on his head again before he bursts out to the legate:

Now keep your holy word: go meet the French,
 And from his holiness use all your power
 To stop his marches 'fore we are inflam'd.
 Our discontented counties do revolt;
 Our people quarrel with obedience,
 Swearing allegiance and the love of soul
 To stranger blood, to foreign royalty.
 This inundation of mistemp'red humour
 Rests by you only to be qualified:
 Then pause not; for the present time's so sick
 That present med'cine must be minist'red
 Or overthrow incurable ensues.

(V, i, 5-16)

¹²Palmer, p. 333.

¹³Dowden, p. 170.

Here we see John's way to win back his barons' love. Pandulph leaves and Faulconbridge enters, and the first question John asks is,

Would not my lords return to me again
After they heard young Arthur was alive?
(V, i, 37-38)

This reference ties the two scenes together. Believing Arthur dead, John decided to submit to Pandulph. Even after Hubert informed him of the deception, John still thought that his yielding to Rome's demands would insure his retention of the crown, in spite of Arthur's claims. As if that were not enough, after submitting to the degradation demanded by Pandulph, he had the incredible baseness to content himself that he had yielded of his own free will:¹⁴

Is this Ascension-day? Did not the prophet
Say that before Ascension-day at noon
My crown I should give off? Even so I have:
I did suppose it should be on constraint;
But, heaven be thank'd, it is but voluntary.
(V, i, 25-29)

Thus Shakespeare represents John's act as a deliberate choice of expedient policy, not an act forced by circumstances beyond his control. John had hoped to throw a new situation in the face of his returning nobles, imposing on them spiritual as well as political reasons for obedience.

Now he faces Faulconbridge with growing apprehension as he hears of Arthur's actual death. Seeing his drooping sadness, Faulconbridge encourages him to take heart:

Away, and glister like the God of war
When he intendeth to become the field:

¹⁴Ibid., p. 171.

Show boldness and aspiring confidence!
 What, shall they seek the lion in his den,
 And fright him there? and make him tremble there?
 O, let it not be said: forage, and run
 To meet displeasure farther from the doors,
 And grapple with him ere he come so nigh!

(V, i, 54-61)

Then John tells of his peace with Rome, and his young nephew explodes into declamation, urging him into battle in case Pandulph cannot make peace. John listens to his young friend with feeble admiration¹⁵ and gives his sole reply: "Have thou the ordering of this present time" (V, i, 77). Faulconbridge urges action, an attempt at self-defense, the duty of battle for the sake of honor; but John has fallen. He is incapable of accepting the responsibilities of his crown, and he seems to be aware of it. His response is the yielding up of England's care into the hands of his illegitimate nephew: "Have thou the ordering of this present time."¹⁶

John's submission to Pandulph is his abdication as king. He passes his royal function to Faulconbridge.¹⁷ Thereafter, this shadow of a king retires from the stage as a public personage, leaving political matters to be determined by Faulconbridge. He dies in Swinstead Abbey, remote from the affairs of his kingdom.¹⁸ The final words that he hears concern the ruin of his realm; he is not permitted to hear of its deliverance.¹⁹ Significantly, his last words are addressed to Faulconbridge:

¹⁵S. G. Canning, Thoughts on Shakespeare's Plays (London, 1884), p. 66.

¹⁶Dowden, p. 172

¹⁷Reese, p. 274.

¹⁸Palmer, p. 333.

¹⁹Stopford Brooke, p. 250.

My heart hath one poor string to stay it by,
Which holds but till thy news be uttered;
And then all this thou seest is but a clod
And module of confounded royalty.

(V, vii, 55-58)

John has become physically what he has previously been morally and mentally.

This is the John that Shakespeare chose to write about. He is not the all-conquering hero of Tudor myth, but a king who begins like a roaring lion and who ends like a whimpering puppy. He is not even afforded the luxury of repentance enjoyed by the John of the Raigne in his dying moments. Somewhere in between he is confounded by his own policies of expediency and a meanness of nature that succumbs to the temptation to secure his throne by immoral means. When his own plans fail, he is morally bankrupt. Another must function in his stead until England is saved. The hero of King John is not this "module of confounded royalty."

CHAPTER VII

FAULCONBRIDGE AS HERO

Since John fails as the hero of the play, many critics have looked for another character who functions as the protagonist. Their search has led to a designation of the Bastard, Philip Faulconbridge, as the play's hero. The critics have progressively interpreted the Bastard as a type, as hero, and at last, as Shakespeare's ideal man and king.¹

This contrasts immensely with the older critical view of Faulconbridge: that he is primarily a representative character, a type of the common, patriotic Englishman who is a good soldier and a faithful subject.² Beverly Warner is representative of this view:

It would appear that Shakespeare intended to have him represent the sturdy heart of English manhood, which, while often misused, humiliated, and beaten back, finally conquered and rose to its proper place in the making of later and nobler England, as the commons; not the legislature of that name narrowly, but the makers of legislatures. So while Philip Faulconbridge was an imaginary character, he was not an imaginary force.³

From this humble position, the Bastard was elevated to the rank of the play's protagonist by H. H. Furness, who says:

Faulconbridge carries all before him from his first scene, where he at once captivates the King and [the dowager] Queen Eleanor, to the final words of the play put in his mouth as the one best typifying the rugged warrior Englishman of the time. The braggart

¹Van de Water, p. 137.

²Ibid.

³Beverly E. Warner, English History in Shakespeare's Plays (New York, 1894), p. 51.

of the early scenes is drawn on the same plan as that of the Faulconbridge of The Troublesome Raigne, as in the older play he maintains practically the same character throughout. It was the intuitive perception of Shakespeare that grasped the dramatic possibilities of such a character and showed how a man of Faulconbridge's temperament attains to full strength and fineness by responsibility placed upon him, and by the confidence of one who trusts him implicitly.⁴

John Masefield, looking for successful and unsuccessful kings in Shakespeare's history plays, finds Faulconbridge as the man who should have been the King of England: "He is the man fitted by nature to rule the English"⁵ Masefield writes this while decrying Faulconbridge; he sees him as a prototype of Henry V, whom he hates. Nevertheless, he does view the Bastard as a successful, if coarse, leader.⁶

It was left to John Middleton Murry to develop this conception of Faulconbridge to the highest degree. He says that in the Raigne Faulconbridge gave up his inheritance to become known as Coeur de Lion's bastard son and that starting from this one trait "Shakespeare made him into the likeness of a King of England, by 'sovereignty of nature.'"⁷ As John becomes a corrupt shadow of kingliness, the Bastard becomes the substance--the defender of English unity and the victorious opponent of papal pretensions. Not only is he the ideal Englishman, but he is also Shakespeare's first true hero.⁸

⁴Horace Howard Furness, Jr., editor, The Life and Death of King John, Vol. XIX of A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare, 27 vols. (Philadelphia, 1919), x-xii.

⁵John Masefield, William Shakespeare (New York, 1954), p. 55.

⁶Tillyard, pp. 258-259.

⁷John Middleton Murry, Shakespeare (New York, 1936), p. 130.

⁸Ibid., pp. 130-131, 136.

Three other major critics have accepted this view of Faulconbridge. Georg Brandes describes Faulconbridge as an English Hercules who bears the weight of the play.⁹ John Dover Wilson calls him "the real hero,"¹⁰ while E. M. W. Tillyard, who finds him "one of Shakespeare's great versions of the regal type,"¹¹ goes on to show that the Bastard has the masterful strength of the lion, the cunning of the fox, and fidelity and conscientiousness of the pelican--the necessary components in the character of a genuine king.¹²

Thus, a large number of Shakespearean critics have fastened their attention on Faulconbridge as the hero of King John. Their analysis, however, has not gone unchallenged. Julia Van de Water, for instance, has charged that this view of the Bastard exaggerates both his merits and his function. As a result, the evidence offered by the play itself is unjustifiably distorted.¹³ Therefore, we must return to the play to examine the character actually presented by Shakespeare.

The Faulconbridge of the Raigne is a vulgar braggart who nevertheless has all of the scruples of conscience--and most of the feelings about honor--possessed by a proper gentleman. In the first act of the old play it is his legitimate brother Robert who tells of their mother's infidelity; the Bastard is reluctant to reveal his mother's shame:¹⁴

Please it your Majestie, the wrong is mine, yet wil I abide all wrongs, before I open my mouth to unrippe the shamefull slander

⁹Brandes, I, 170.

¹⁰Wilson, p. xxxix.

¹¹Tillyard, p. 258.

¹²Ibid., pp. 259-261.

¹³Van de Water, p. 137.

¹⁴Charlton, p. 66.

of my parents, the dishonour of myself, & the wicked dealing of my brother in this princely assembly.

(Raigne, I, i, 87-90)

Also, this Faulconbridge must be persuaded by visions before he believes that he is the son of Richard Coeur de Lion:¹⁵

What winde of honour blowes this furie forth?
 Or whence procede these fumes of Majestie?
 Me thinkes I heare a hollow Eccho sound,
 That Philip is the Sonne unto a King:
 The whistling leaves upon the trembling trees
 Whistle in consort I am Richards Sonne:
 The bubling murmur of the waters fall,
 Records Phillippus Regius fillius: [Philip, Royal son]

(Raigne, I, i, 244-251)

Shakespeare's Faulconbridge has no such scruples. He discloses his brother's charge of bastardy, exults that he does not bear the physical traits of a Faulconbridge, and rejoices in the infidelity of his mother, thanking her for his real father.¹⁶

The Bastard of the Raigne reluctantly accepts the truth of his brother's charge and the circumstances force him to obey a code of honor imposed by the disclosure of his royal lineage.¹⁷ He finally decides:

Let land and living goe, this honors fire
 That makes me sweare King Richard was my Sire.

(Raigne, I, i, 274-275)

On the other hand, Shakespeare's Bastard is not forced to make a decision. He deliberately elects to acknowledge his royal bastardy so that he may follow a code of personal advantage. He seems to wave off conscience and choose commodity as the code to guide his life.¹⁸ He

¹⁵Ibid., p. 67.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 68.

¹⁸Ibid.

tells his brother: "Brother, take you my land, I'll take my chance" (I, i, 151). In his first soliloquy, he rejoices in his new status as a knight and tells how he will take advantage of it. He declares himself to be a "mounting spirit" who will deliver

Sweet, sweet, poison for the age's tooth:
Which, though I will not practise to deceive,
Yet, to avoid deceit, I mean to learn;
For it shall strew the footsteps of my rising.
(I, i, 213-216)

So the Faulconbridge of King John is constructed along somewhat less noble lines than his namesake in the Raigne. But he is far wittier: he teases Lady Faulconbridge; he mocks his half-brother's appearance; and he is serious about nothing, not even his illegitimacy.¹⁹ He is called a "rude man," a "good blunt fellow," a "madcap," and a "knave." On the one hand he is a furious and violent ranter; on the other, he is a brilliant, if shameless, wit.²⁰

In the second act he continues in this vein. He taunts Austria and mocks Lewis. He is irreverent and vulgar. Yet he is also a soldier with an eagerness for battle; beneath his ranting against Austria lies a bold courage, for he is impatient to avenge his father's death. When John begins to organize his troops, Faulconbridge shows his own readiness--and his service of commodity--as he urges the king to action: "Speed then, to take advantage of the field" (II, i, 297).

¹⁹Van de Water, p. 139.

²⁰Bonjour, p. 267.

aware of Arthur's right and John's usurpation and that he is contemptuous of political machination.²⁴ In addition, he is honest with himself, further distinguishing himself from every other character in the play and becoming "a touchstone for all that is false, unstable, and pretentious in his surroundings."²⁵ Indeed, he is honest enough to admit that while he despises it in others, he will follow their example:

Since Kings break faith upon commodity,
Gain, be my lord, for I will worship thee!
(II, i, 597-598)

In spite of its sentiment and honesty, this soliloquy is very damaging to the case for Faulconbridge as hero. His supporters are unconvincing here. Tillyard merely shrugs it off by claiming that "the Bastard has the English fear of being too openly serious and righteous"²⁶ Bonjour tries to explain the Bastard's honest confession as an overreaction when he "realizes that he is about to make a spectacle of himself in his own eyes (just because it looks as if he had been prompted in his outburst by a virtuous indignation)"²⁷

Such explanations bethump with words even more than the speech by the citizen of Angiers. The Bastard's honesty is enough of an answer to those wispy rationalizations. So far Faulconbridge is little more than a ranting soldier of fortune with an inclination toward introspection, and an audience without the hindsight of these critics would certainly

²⁴Bullough, IV, 12.

²⁵Palmer, p. 324.

²⁶Tillyard, p. 261.

²⁷Bonjour, p. 268.

have no reason to doubt the face value of his soliloquy. The speech is entirely in character with the Bastard's revealed personality.²⁸

The third act shows the same Faulconbridge. He again derides Austria, but this time John rebukes his ridiculous repetition when the king glowers: "We like not this: thou dost forget thyself" (III, i, 60).²⁹ The Bastard however, has not forgotten himself; he is acting thoroughly in character. John's stern reprimand only quiets him momentarily; thrice more he repeats his taunt before John sends him to gather the English army for battle.

Then Faulconbridge proves that he can do more than talk. He kills Austria and rescues Eleanor from the French. Yet, when the King sends him to England to rob the monasteries, he seems delighted that commodity has beckoned to him. He says to John and Eleanor:

Bell, book, and candle shall not drive me back
 When gold and silver becks me to come on:
 I leave your highness. Grandam, I will pray--
 If ever I remember to be holy--
 For your fair safety; so I kiss your hand.

(III, ii, 22-26)³⁰

Presumably, he will receive a percentage of the total if he successfully carries out his commission.³¹ This and his impudent farewell to Eleanor show us that the Bastard is still "basically a 'good blunt

²⁸Van de Water, p. 14.

²⁹Honigmann's scene division. Most editors have III, i, 134.

³⁰Honigmann's scene division. Most editors have III, iii, 12-16.

³¹William H. Matchett, "Richard's Divided Heritage in King John," Essays in Criticism, XII (July, 1962), 242.

fellow' out to make his fortune."³² His character has been developed to a somewhat higher level than the Faulconbridge of the Raigne, who declares at this point that he longs

To make some sport among the smooth skin Nunnes,
 Ande keepe some revell with the fanzen Friers.
 (Raigne, I, ix, 43-44)

Act IV provides the beginning of the "kingly" elements of the Bastard's character. He is off-stage for a long time before he meets John in scene two. He comes with money, news, and Peter of Pomfret. John immediately sends him off again, this time to seek out the nobles. He finds them just before they find the body of Arthur. His last speech before the entrance of Hubert is a mere three lines, and he finally shows the depth of character that resides beneath his blustery exterior:

It is a damned and a bloody work;
 The graceless action of a heavy hand,
 If that it be the work of any hand.
 (IV, iii, 57-59)

He is morally indignant, but unlike the nobles, he refuses to blame anyone for Arthur's death. Furthermore, he defends Hubert from the barons with a fierce threat that Salisbury does not dare to challenge:

Thou wert better gall the divel, Salisbury:
 If thou but frown on me, or stir thy foot,
 Or teach thy hasty spleen to do me shame,
 I'll strike thee dead. Put up thy sword betime--
 Or I'll so maul you and your toasting-iron
 That you shall think the divel is come from hell.
 (IV, iii, 95-100)

³²Van de Water, p. 141.

The moment the nobles leave, Faulconbridge turns on Hubert with a burning wrath that rushes through two interruptions by the accused murderer. The Bastard begins:

Here's a good world! Knew you of this fair work?
 Beyond the infinite and boundless reach
 Of mercy, if thou didst this deed of death,
 Art thou damn'd, Hubert.

(IV, iii, 116-119)

Murry comments that this is "the voice of a king by nature: moved to the depths, yet moved in such sort that he can distinguish the voice of innocence in Hubert."³³ The first part of this remark is eisegesis of the first rank. The Bastard is amazed, stunned, and shocked to the depths of a moral nature scarcely hinted at previously. Yet, his is not the voice of a "king by nature." It is the cry of a sensitive man who is still green in the old world of commodity.

As Hubert bears away the body of Arthur, Faulconbridge speaks again, not only betraying his bewilderment, but also demonstrating "his sudden awareness of the superficiality of his previous ethics."³⁴ His words, however, do not show a new character, but a strong development of the slight glimpses of introspection that we saw previously. The Bastard again shows his belief in Arthur's right to the throne; he also reveals the irrelevancy of the question of right in the face of national disaster. He reveals the complexity of the issues facing him and his determination to act regardless of the problems.³⁵ Although it is

³³Murry, p. 136

³⁴Calderwood, p. 352.

³⁵Matchett, p. 247.

clearly to his personal advantage to follow the departing lords, the Bastard decides to ally himself with England, discarding his previous commitment to commodity and choosing to serve the highest form of honor.³⁶

Nevertheless, this decision does not, as Calderwood supposes, make the Bastard "morally worthy of the crown."³⁷ If it had done so, then a similar decision by the nobles would have made them equally worthy. Moral sensitivity must not be equated with kingliness, and Faulconbridge's decision here is clearly his moral duty. The barons reject this duty and join the enemies of their country, thus forfeiting any claim for sympathy.³⁸

In Act V Faulconbridge continues to be his newly found self. He urges John to action with his former exuberance. He shows that he is still the brave soldier as he denounces the "inglorious league" with the Pope and insists on gathering an army to defend England:

Let us, my liege, to arms!
Perchance the cardinal cannot make your peace;
Or if he do, let it at least be said
They saw we had a purpose of defence.

(V, i, 73-76)

John, however, is lost in the thorns of his own immorality, and he authorizes Faulconbridge to order England's defense. The relationship of the two men in this scene is unmistakably that of a king and his servant--and the Bastard is not the king.

³⁶Calderwood, p. 352.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Bonjour, p. 269.

Nor does he develop into a king in the remainder of the act. He comes before Pandulph and Lewis saying, "I am sent to speak . . ." (V, ii, 119). He defies Lewis with the fiery threats that he has always used, and he blasts the traitorous nobles.

And you degenerate, you ingrate revolts,
 You bloody Neroes, ripping up the womb
 Of your dear mother England, blush for shame

. (V, ii, 151-153)

This tirade does not come from Faulconbridge as hero, but from the Bastard who represents the King of England.

In the ensuing battle the rebellious nobles discover that John has more friends than they had anticipated. They find themselves fighting for their lives, knowing that a French defeat will be their defeat also. Salisbury grudgingly exclaims:

That misbegotten divel, Faulconbridge,
 In spite of spite, alone upholds the day.

(V, iv, 4-5)

So here again, it is the Bastard as a bold soldier, not as a king, who is presented. He unquestionably represents what the King of England should be, and his attitude toward England's affairs is undeniably what John's should be,³⁹ but that does not make him the king.

The final scene proves that Faulconbridge is not the protagonist of the play. Having been informed by Hubert of John's poisoning, the Bastard rushes into the king's presence. He reports the loss of half of his army as John dies. In his usual blunt manner he reminds the readers of his role in the play, that of the king's faithful servant:

³⁹Van de Water, p. 143.

Art thou gone so? I do but stay behind
 To do the office for thee of revenge,
 And then my soul shall wait on thee to heaven,
 As it on earth hath been thy servant still.

(V, vii, 70-73)

He then turns to the English lords and urges them to follow him in the fight against Lewis. When they tell him of Lewis' offer of peace and his immediate withdrawal, the Bastard turns to Prince Henry and pledges his devotion. He speaks of the "glory of the land," "submission," "faithful services," and "true subjection." His closing speech is a proclamation of national unity and a reminder to the nobles that he has been guided by honor, not commodity. It is a declaration that being true to England is the genuine standard for both public and private conduct.

Thus Faulconbridge develops in Shakespeare's play from a ranting braggadocio to a noble servant of the king, bold in battle and perceptive in analyzing political realities. He retains his honesty and straight-forwardness throughout the play, but the baser elements of his character fall away as his moral perception increases. Because of his honesty he is the touchstone for the dishonesty that pervades the other characters in the play. He begins as a worshiper of commodity, but at the death of Arthur he suddenly sees that "bawd" for what she is, and he declares himself for the best interests of his nation.

The Bastard is heroic in the end, but he is not the hero of the play. He grows up from an insolent youth into an impetuous young patriot, but he is not the protagonist of the drama. If anything, throughout the course of the whole play he epitomizes the loyal

follower, not the royal leader. He reveals his knowledge of John's usurpation, Arthur's right, and the weakness of the persons around him. Notwithstanding, as long as John possesses the throne, whether justly or unjustly, to Faulconbridge he is "the impersonation of the state, to whom loyalty is due."⁴⁰ He himself tells us that his real role is that of the eternal servant, and he resists the temptation to rise above his state.

The Bastard is Shakespeare's incarnation of the patriotism of his own day,⁴¹ not an incarnation of genuine kingliness. He declares the feelings of Elizabethan England, but he never achieves the kingliness that John shows in the opening scene.⁴² In spite of his royal lineage, he is an outsider in the society into which he is drawn.⁴³ On the personal level he is unsuccessful; the other characters frequently snub and rebuff him,⁴⁴ even the nobles in the closing scene. Militarily, he is not an all-conquering leader. In fact, England's salvation depends as much on Melun's confession, the loss of the Dauphin's supply ships, and Pandulph's support as it does on the Bastard's struggle with the French.⁴⁵

Faulconbridge is not the hero of King John, but neither is he a chorus that lies "outside the structure of the play"⁴⁶ Nor is

⁴⁰Corson, p. 59

⁴¹Stopford Brooke, p. 229.

⁴²Van de Water, p. 144.

⁴³Knights, pp. 27-28.

⁴⁴Reese, p. 279.

⁴⁵Bullough, IV, 8.

⁴⁶Campbell, "Histories," p. 166.

Miss Van de Water correct when she says "there is absolutely no dramatic necessity for his presence."⁴⁷ True, Faulconbridge does serve a choric function at times, but he is also an irreplaceable, integral character who influences the plot. He is more than a voice; he forestalls the French with John's borrowed majesty and his own valor until the recalcitrant nobles return their allegiance to England. The structural hero he is not, but he is a character of vital importance to the themes and actions of King John.

⁴⁷Van de Water, p. 145.

CHAPTER VIII

ENGLAND AS HERO

Although the two major characters of King John fail to develop into dramatic heroes, it is not necessary to agree with those who disdain the play's structure and pronounce King John an ineffective piece of Shakespeare's early writing. There is a third possible solution to the problem of identifying the hero of the play, a solution that explains both the question of characterization and the issue of thematic development: the hero is the nation, the commonwealth, England.

It should not be a strange suggestion that the hero should be a character not listed in the dramatis personae. Tillyard says that "Shakespeare's eight connected history plays" are "epic, with England (or Morality-wise Respublica) for hero" ¹ Boas extends this slightly, calling England the true protagonist of the entirety of Shakespeare's history plays, "an omnipresent and immortal figure, with the divine ichor, though often spilt and wasted, never exhausted in her veins, and bubbling up afresh in a perpetual renewal of youth." ² If the hero of an epic series can be England, then the hero of an individual play could also be England. The idea of a nation being the hero of a drama is not without a possible literary precedent, for it has been

¹E. M. W. Tillyard, "Shakespeare's Historical Cycle: Organism or Compilation?" Studies in Philology, LI (January, 1954), 34.

²Boas, p. 235.

claimed that Norton and Sackville made Commonwealth the protagonist of Gorboduc.³

Charlton argues that the "hero of the play is England, and not its paltering king The plot is England's well-being"4
 There are four lines of proof which support this view. The first is the imagery of the play, which points to England as the protagonist. The second is the tension between the roles of John and Faulconbridge. The third and fourth are the major themes of the play and the topical references, which argue for a declaration of England as the hero of the play.

From the viewpoint of imagery, King John stands apart from the two tetralogies of history plays. The kinds of images are noticeably different from those used in the tetralogies, and as a whole the images seem to exercise much more control in causing and sustaining atmosphere. The paramount images which dominate all the rest are those of the body and bodily action. They show that Shakespeare's imagination was brilliantly alive, and a large part of the unusual vividness and vigor of the images "is due to the fact that Shakespeare seems to have thought more continuously and definitely than usual of certain outstanding emotions and themes in the play in terms of a person with bodily characteristics and bodily movements."⁵ It is the only time in Shakespeare's dramas that images concerning nature or animals do not dominate, or almost dominate, the other pictures in the play.⁶

³Ridner, The English History Play, p. 49.

⁴Charlton, p. 66.

⁵Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us (Cambridge, 1966), pp. 245-246.

⁶Ibid., p. 246.

In any play, and especially in King John, it is impossible to entirely separate bodily images from those of personification, because many may well be classified under either category. Therefore, an image will be categorized under "body" when a particular movement seems emphasized and under "personification" when that appears to be the most outstanding aspect. The total number of images under these two headings in King John is seventy-one.⁷

These images are important, because they vividly color for us the picture that Shakespeare painted in King John:

The two great protagonists, France and England, the fate that befalls them under the guises of fortune, war and death; the emotions and qualities called into play by the clash of their contending desires: grief, sorrow, melancholy, displeasure, amazement, commodity; the besieged city of Angiers; all these, and other entities or abstractions, are seen by Shakespeare--many of them repeatedly--as persons; angry, proud, contemptuous, saucy, indignant, smooth-faced, surly and wanton; sinning, suffering, repenting, kissing, winking, wrestling, resisting, whirling, hurrying, feasting, drinking, bragging, frowning and grinning.⁸

In this tableau, as elsewhere (cf. Richard II, Act II, iii, 92-95; III, iii, 97) England is a person, a pale, white-faced woman whose foot drives back the ocean and protects her islanders from foreign lands (II, i, 23-25). She stands embraced in the arms of Neptune and knows the events which go on around her (V, ii, 34-35). She is a mother whose warring sons "march/ Upon her gentle bosom . . ." (V, ii, 25, 27-28) in time of civil war.

Likewise, France is viewed as a woman; in the eyes of Constance she is "a bawd for fortune and King John . . ." (II, ii, 60).⁹ John tells

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Honigmann's scene division. Most editors have III, i, 60.

Chatillon to be "as lightning in the eyes of France . . ." (I, i, 24), and later he speaks to Arthur of "the coward hand of France . . ." (II, i, 158). Faulconbridge rejoices that if Austria attacks Angiers from the north and if Philip attacks from the south, then

Austria and France shoot in each other's mouth:
I'll stir them to it.

(II, i, 414-415)

Soon after that, the Bastard acknowledges that Angiers' marriage proposal "buffets better than a fist of France" (II, i, 465). In his commodity speech he says that conscience buckled on France's armor (II, i, 564), and he speaks of commodity enticing "the outward eye of fickle France . . ." (II, i, 583).

In like manner, Angiers, commodity, fortune, war, and death are viewed as persons. They are personified in vivid physical terms, and each one receives a distinct and vivid characterization. Angiers is a besieged woman (II, i, 215-230). Commodity is a sly devil of a broker who changes purposes and breaks vows (II, i, 567-569). Fortune is a corrupted woman who hourly adulterates with John (II, ii, 55-56).¹⁰ War is a fearful creature with grappling vigor and a rough frown (III, i, 30)¹¹ and angrily bristles his mane (IV, iii, 149). Death, which feasts on men, is a bare-ribbed monster with swords for teeth and jaws lined with steel (V, ii, 177; II, i, 352-354).

While all of these are presented as whole beings, it is highly significant that John is always pictured only as a part, specifically a

¹⁰Most editors have III, i, 55-56.

¹¹Most editors have III, i, 104.

part of a body.¹² Pandulph sees John as the hand which holds Philip's hand in apparent amity. The legate says to the French king:

France, thou mayst hold a serpent by the tongue,
A cased lion by the mortal paw,
A fasting tiger safer by the tooth,
Than keep in peace that hand which thou dost hold,
(III, i, 184-187)¹³

The image is extended by Pandulph when he persuades Lewis to invade England:

O, sir, when he shall hear of your approach,
If that young Arthur be not gone already,
Even at that news he dies; and then the hearts
Of all his people shall revolt from him,
And kiss the lips of unacquainted change,
And pick strong matters of revolt and wrath
Out of the bloody fingers' ends of John.
(III, iii, 162-168)¹⁴

John, as the mouth of England, defies the Pope (III, i, 78),¹⁵ and he tells Hubert that he sees himself as a foot that constantly finds Arthur "a very serpent in my way . . ." (III, ii, 71).¹⁶ In the most horrible and penetrating image in the entire play, Salisbury calls John "the foot/That leaves the print of blood where'er it walks" (IV, iii, 25-26). Then as John dies, he bemoans to Faulconbridge that

all the shrouds wherewith my life should sail
Are turned to one thread, one little hair;
(V, vii, 53-54)

¹²Spurgeon, pp. 248-249.

¹³Most editors have III, i, 258-261.

¹⁴Most editors have III, iv, 162-168.

¹⁵Most editors have III, i, 152.

¹⁶Most editors have III, iii, 61.

He concludes by acknowledging his imminent death, which shall leave him "but a clod/And module of confounded royalty" (V, vii, 57-58). John ends his life feeling that he is only a fragment, a counterfeit of humanity.¹⁷

Thus, in a play filled with active human figures and vibrant personifications of abstractions as living persons, John is only presented as part of a body, a portion at times covered with human blood.¹⁸ England is a person, but her king is merely a part of a person, a portion of the body politic. This is further borne out in the play when both John and Philip are directly addressed as "England" and "France," and each speaks as the mouth of his respective country. The imagery clearly shows that the salvation of the body politic is the subject of King John:

This England never did, nor never shall,
Lie at the proud foot of a conqueror,
But when it first did help to wound itself.
Now these her princes are come home again
Come the three corners of the world in arms
And we shall shock them! Nought shall make us rue
If England to itself do rest but true!
(V, vii, 112-118)

Even as the imagery shows England to be the hero and John only a representative portion of the body politic, so the relationship of the roles of the king and the Bastard gives additional proof of England's being the real protagonist of the play. Several critics have noted the corresponding fall of John and the rise of Faulconbridge in the structure of King John. A consistent interpretation of John's descent and

¹⁷Spurgeon, p. 249.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 250.

the Bastard's ascent shows that the usurping king and his illegitimate nephew are defenders of the real hero. While John acts in the best interests of his country, he prospers; when he puts his personal gain above the good of England, he founders. On the other hand, Faulconbridge begins the obvious part of his ascent when he places his country's best interests above his private gain.

In short, the plot of the play concerns the well-being of England.¹⁹ "The life and honor of the hero is jeopardised, in part, by external enemies, but, much more, by internal divisions and domestic disaffection."²⁰ From the opening line of Act I through Act III, scene one, England is threatened by external enemies, and she is ably defended by John. From Act III, scene two, to the end of the play this threat continues, but it is compounded by the internal treachery; John, the creator of the domestic dissension, proves incapable of defending England in the play's final movement, so he authorizes Faulconbridge to do so in his behalf.

Even though John's right to the throne is challenged, he is nonetheless the symbol of English nationalism.²¹ In spite of his usurpation, he must still be preferred to Arthur, who is portrayed as a young boy who would be incapable of guiding England in those troubled

¹⁹Charlton, p. 66.

²⁰J. A. R. Marriott, English History in Shakespeare (London, 1918), p. 164.

²¹Ribner, Patterns in Shakespearean Tragedy, pp. 38-39.

years.²² In addition, he is firmly supported by the enemies of England. Shakespeare emphasizes that John is the kind of king England needs through his presentation of John's victorious struggle with the French, his quick and open defiance of the Pope, and his support of English nationalism, which he symbolizes and about which he is the rallying point throughout the play. John is at the summit of his glory in the middle of Act III: he has defied Pandulph, defeated the French, and captured Arthur. Then when he orders Hubert to kill Arthur, he commits the sin that results in his deterioration, and the remainder of the play marks his decline.²³

Faulconbridge, on the other hand, begins the play as a personage of seemingly little character or importance. A blustering young adventurer who proudly affirms the moral stigma of his illegitimacy,²⁴ he appears to be merely a self-seeking soldier. He tells James Gurney, "There's toys abroad . . ." (I, i, 232), then follows John and commodity to France. In France he irritates everyone with his buffoonery, but he also proves to be an able warrior. In his soliloquy on commodity he warns the listener that he is a grasping adventurer, and in the next act he proves it by heading for England to shake the bags of the priests.²⁵ Shakespeare does not alienate his audience from Faulconbridge, however. He allows the Bastard to show his honesty, his bravery, and his

²²John Sibly, "The Anomalous Case of King John," English Literary History, XXXIII (June, 1966), 420.

²³Ribner, Patterns in Shakespearean Tragedy, pp. 39, 41.

²⁴Ibid., p. 41.

²⁵Ibid.

patriotism: he knows that John is a usurper, but he serves John faithfully because he is England's king.

The Bastard is part of Shakespeare's first attempt to create balanced, though contrasting, characterizations. He and John are foils to each other. At first Philip contrasts with John's strength as king in his role as a mere soldier of fortune, and later John's weakness contrasts with his growing moral strength.²⁶ In fact, almost all of the first act is a subtle allegory in which John's illegitimacy is mirrored in the Bastard's. Both have possession of a title without right, each supported by a legal testament affirming his title. Faulconbridge, however, gives up his possession for the promise of personal gain for following John. Eleanor's invitation certainly promises to make up for the loss of his inheritance:

I like thee well: wilt thou forsake thy fortune,
Bequeath thy land to him and follow me?
I am a soldier and now bound to France.
(I, i, 148-150)

John refuses to give up his title, however, and self-interest is one of his reasons.

In the second half of the play John begins to fall because he clings to commodity as the controlling morality in his life. One of the paradoxes of the play is that John's usurpation is not the cause of his downfall. His borrowed majesty is absolutely necessary while England is in danger. Once England has been safely defended, he still could resign the throne to Arthur at any time with the rather reasonable claim that

²⁶Ibid., p. 38.

he has been serving as a regent for Arthur (as he had been for Richard I) and not at all as a usurper.²⁷ John, however, puts his self-interest above England's well-being and orders Arthur's death. His command is wrong on political as well as moral grounds, for he--as crafty a practitioner of commodity as Pandulph--should have foreseen the disastrous effect of his murderous act on the nobles. Once he commands his nephew's death, John begins to fall.

That Hubert defects from his appointed duty is only the first of several evidences that John's power and support are crumbling. His second coronation reveals his fears, and the nobles' defection confirms them. Messengers arrive with news of unexpected complications, the landing of the regrouped French army, and the death of Queen Eleanor, John's chief supporter.²⁸

John's response is not the quick and ready reply of the first half of the play, for he thinks first of his crown, not of his country. The way he goes about protecting his crown shows his moral deterioration clearly, for his ignominious subservience to Rome is nothing less than the surrender of England. When Faulconbridge urges him into action, John cannot exercise command. He is morally bankrupt; he has spent himself completely in serving commodity, and he has little left for England. When he needs to be her mouth, he is only a bloody foot. John is merely the shadow of bloody fingers when he relinquishes the defense of England into the brave hands of Faulconbridge. Nothing

²⁷Sibly, p. 420.

²⁸Ribner, Patterns in Shakespearean Tragedy, pp. 41-42.

remains for John except death, which will transform him physically into what he now is spiritually.

The Bastard rises as rapidly as John falls. The first indication of Philip's moral sensitivity is his strong reaction to the death of Arthur, coupled as it is with a wary suspension of judgment. Then his fearless protection of Hubert and subsequent qualified admonishment show that his honesty has indeed grown; but the Bastard really demonstrates a deep moral nature when he decides England's fate by refusing to follow the nobles. His path of safety is obviously in the direction of alliance with Lewis, for everyone is against John. The prudent course of action would be to join the stronger side. Faulconbridge, however, refuses to choose rebellion instead of service to a king whom he suspects of being responsible for a terrible crime. He now changes his standard of morality, placing England's good above his own personal safety, and in doing so, he decides England's fate,²⁹ at the same time saving both his country and himself.

He hurries to John to urge a defense of England in spite of everything. When the king assigns "the ordering of this present time" into his hands, the Bastard becomes the symbol of English unity.³⁰ As such, he withstands the French and the villainous barons until the supply boats sink and the nobles discover the French treachery. He willingly supports Henry's right, pledging to the rightful heir his

²⁹Reese, pp. 276-277.

³⁰Ribner, Patterns in Shakespearean Tragedy, p. 44.

service as the king's true servant and assuring the continuation of an orderly, legal government in England.³¹

This careful balancing of the careers of John and Faulconbridge--with the former falling as the latter rises--results in a unified dramatic structure that expresses the theme of national unity which is symbolized by the Bastard when he sets the welfare of England above his own gain and glory. The national unity for which Faulconbridge strives is the same goal that John had sought earlier but had neglected by his self-seeking methods after he believed Arthur to be dead. Thus, the stories of John and Faulconbridge are revealed to be parts of a consistent whole, with England triumphant in spite of John's failure.³²

In King John there is a corresponding transference of sympathy from the declining hero to the ascending one. There is a reversal of this process in Richard II. It will be instructive to examine briefly the character parallelism in this sister play. Richard begins the play as a most unattractive character, while Henry Bolingbroke carries the sympathy of the audience as the wronged defender of England in search of justice. As Richard falls, Bolingbroke rises; but Henry steadily becomes less attractive, and sympathy for Richard mounts. In the crucial deposition scene in Act IV, Richard deposes himself and gives to Bolingbroke "the symbolic representation of England which is always in the title of king."³³ When Henry accepts the crown, he is the King of England, and the allegiance due formerly to Richard belongs to him.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid., pp. 39, 44.

³³Ibid., pp. 45-46.

Yet, although Shakespeare acknowledges the necessity of Henry's rule for England's preservation, he censures his means of grasping the crown. The triumph of Henry IV as the King of England is simultaneously Henry Bolingbroke's moral ruin as a man. At the same time, the downfall of Richard as a king is the beginning of his regeneration as a man.³⁴

There are, of course, many parallels with King John, but we are primarily interested in the symbolism of the king. Richard is the King of England until he surrenders the actual title. Henry symbolically represents England only when he receives the crown. In King John, John never surrenders his actual title. His function as England's defender passes to Faulconbridge, but the title obviously does not. Those who would make John the hero must account for a morally incapacitated John delegating his kingly authority, for Faulconbridge says to Lewis and the English lords:

Now hear our English king,
For thus his royalty doth speak in me
(V, ii, 128-129)

On the other hand, those who would make Faulconbridge the hero must account for the fact that his reception of the regal function is only temporary and that he willingly surrenders it to the new king who has the titular right to exercise it.

Besides the play's imagery and the theme of national unity, there are two further lines of proof which clinch the case for England. First is a series of minor themes which grow out of the major one, and second is the significance of King John to an Elizabethan audience.

³⁴Ibid., p. 46.

The first sub-theme considered in King John concerns the succession and may be phrased as a question: Who is a genuine king? or How can a subject know his king? This is the motif which opens the play: Chatillon challenges John's right to the English throne. It is certain that John has a "right" to the crown. The problem exists in a claimant who alleges that he has a better "right." Both John and Eleanor privately admit that John's "right" is defective, but they argue that possession of the crown makes a king; in other words, might makes right.

The quarrel before Angiers is a dramatization of this question. The citizens of Angiers are asked whose title they admit. John argues that he is the lawful king of England, and Philip argues that Arthur is the rightful king. Angiers responds that the gates will be opened for the one who "proves the king" (II, i, 270). John answers: "Doth not the crown of England prove the king?" The citizens respond that they will acknowledge the one "whose right is worthiest . . ." (II, i, 281). In other words, they agree that might makes right, that the strongest should be king.

The answer to this important question concerning the majesty of England is answered by the Bastard in Act IV. The nobles seem to say that immoral acts dispossess a king, but Faulconbridge can find no such rationale for refusing allegiance to a reigning monarch.

Another sub-theme closely allied to this one is the question of rebellion: when is it right to reject a reigning king? Shakespeare had already examined this problem in Richard II, where a legitimate king ruled badly. In King John the question is asked in circumstances much

more favorable to the rebels, for their land is ruled by an illegitimate king who is also a criminal. In Richard II the answer seemed to be that a legitimate king was inviolate. King John, an extreme example of circumstances where, if ever, there would be justification for rebellion, declares explicitly the duty of obedience to the man who holds the crown.³⁵ Shakespeare emphasizes the nobles' ambiguous position when he stresses their grief more than their supposed reasons for rebellion.³⁶ It is the Bastard's decision to serve John and England that saves England from the French and their treacherous allies. When he addresses Lewis and the traitorous nobles it "is simple, stirring stuff that reduces all of the complex issues of the reign to one of patriotic duty."³⁷

In a different form, the same question is asked earlier in the play by Constance. She wants to know if the law is to be obeyed when it is wrong. She says that

when law can do no right
 Let it be lawful that law bar no wrong!
 Law cannot give my child his kingdom here,
 For he that holds his kingdom holds the law;
 Therefore, since law itself is perfect wrong,
 How can the law forbid my tongue to curse?
 (III, i, 111-116)³⁸

Pandulph agrees with Constance and imposes a higher law for Philip to obey, a law which the audience quickly identifies as commodity, not the

³⁵Reese, pp. 272, 274-275.

³⁶Bullough, IV, 8.

³⁷Reese, pp. 277-278.

³⁸Honigmann's scene division. Most editors have III, i, 185-190.

law of heaven. Later, when the English lords obey Pandulph's law, they are obviously in the wrong, for the answer to this question in King John is that while the king lives, he is the source of national authority and he must be obeyed. In the whole play, the only person who disobeys John with impunity is Hubert, who obviously yields to a higher law than his king's command; however, it is also evident that while Hubert obeys the right law, he must be prepared to take the temporal consequences for disobeying the king's law. Like John of Gaunt in Richard II,³⁹ he chooses the possibility of bringing suffering upon himself rather than agree to an act that would bring suffering to others.

National unity, rebellion, obedience, law: these are the major sub-themes that dominate the action in King John (plus the honor/commodity theme discussed in the next chapter). All of these topics lend support to the overriding theme of national unity. They argue that England is obeyed in the person of her king, that once the king has received the crown he is the lawful ruler and must be obeyed. They proclaim in the strongest terms that rebellion rips the womb of Mother England (V, ii, 152-153) and thus is absolutely intolerable. In King John they proclaim England to be the hero who speaks through her king. In other words, King John strongly affirms Tudor doctrine in unequivocal terms.

A final line of proof for the assertion that England is the protagonist of the play concerns the function of an English history play. The primary function of the chronicle play was to use the past as

³⁹H. D. F. Kitto, "A Classical Scholar Looks at Shakespeare," More Talking of Shakespeare (New York, 1959), p. 49.

a mirror of present events so that political lessons could be taught. We have already seen the lessons taught in King John; these lessons relate specifically to Elizabethan England and provide additional defense of England as hero.

First there was the question of the right of kingship. Both John and Elizabeth ascended to the throne with shaky claims, and each was opposed by a rival claimant who was supported by a large portion of the population and whose claim was closely connected with the Catholic cause.⁴⁰ It is hard to believe that Shakespeare intended his audience to see very far beyond the basic situation, however; for Elizabeth, the third heir of Henry VIII, rightfully received the crown, whereas John's own mother admits his usurpation.⁴¹

Of course, the supporters of Mary Stuart called Elizabeth a usurper and used John's treatment of Arthur as a parallel to Elizabeth's conduct toward Mary.⁴² Some commentators have seen resemblances between Hubert and Secretary Davison, Elizabeth's advisor who persuaded her to sign Mary's death warrant and who was later made a scapegoat, even though he was guilty of no further involvement. It would have been extremely dangerous, however, for Shakespeare to suggest to his audience that the queen had wished Mary quietly assassinated instead of publicly and formally executed. In addition, the dramatic parallel in King John

⁴⁰Ribner, The English History Play, p. 84.

⁴¹Bullough, IV, 1.

⁴²Ribner, The English History Play, p. 84.

would make Elizabeth as murderous in reality as John was only in his intention.⁴³

The struggle with the papacy was probably "the most pressing problem of Elizabeth's reign."⁴⁴ Both John and Elizabeth were excommunicated for resisting the Pope, so King John is especially topical on this issue. Elizabethan Englishmen were afraid that influential Catholic nobles might decide to obey the papal bull that had excommunicated Queen Elizabeth and urged the Catholics of England to rise against their queen in support of the schemes of King Philip of Spain.⁴⁵ Thus, the presentation of the English lords communicating with Pandulph and joining Lewis plays on this fear.

Of course, coupled with the papal problem was the threat of foreign invasion under which England lived for years. Philip attempted to invade England, losing his Armada in a storm in 1588. We have already seen that Philip began to build a second armada and that Spanish galleys landed in Cornwall even as late as 1595. In King John the invasion of England was almost successful, but the destruction of Lewis' supply ships on Goodwin Sands led to his final defeat.

Then, too, there is the withdrawal of a French king, after much indecisive fighting, from an alliance with England against Rome. In Elizabeth's day this occurred in 1593 when Henry of Navarre became a Catholic. Although Elizabeth continued to help Henry with a few troops

⁴³Bullough, IV, pp. 1-2.

⁴⁴Ribner, The English History Play, p. 81.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 82.

in 1595-1596, it was rumored that the French king was intriguing with Philip of Spain, Albert of Austria, and Pope Clement.⁴⁶ There is a possibility, therefore, of these events being hinted at in King John, where the French king leaves his friendship with England to become the Pope's ally.

Finally, the succession and national unity were always problems facing the Elizabethans. Elizabeth's failure to marry had become a major issue, upon which the queen forbade discussion. The question of England's next monarch was touchy indeed, complicated as it was by papal intrigues and foreign ambitions. Nothing was more likely after the demise of Elizabeth than civil war, all the more violent because of its long deferral.⁴⁷ When Elizabeth died, however, it became apparent that she had made arrangements for the transfer of power. The queen's secretary, Sir Robert Cecil, had made an agreement that King James of Scotland would be proclaimed King of England as soon as Elizabeth died. The queen's decease came on March 24, 1603, after a very brief illness, and James was immediately--and without dispute--accepted as King, there being "a very general feeling of relief that this dangerous problem had been settled without bloodshed or anarchy."⁴⁸ All of this simply points out the general dread and partial expectancy of national chaos in England in the closing years of Elizabeth's long reign.

King John certainly mirrors all of these problems which faced Elizabethan England. Their topicality is even more important because

⁴⁶Bullough, IV, 2.

⁴⁷Marriott, p. 58.

⁴⁸Granville-Barker and Harrison, p. 182.

Shakespeare offers solutions. King John is a gigantic plea for national unity for support of England in the face of papal claims, foreign invasion, a criminal king, and personal safety. It is a thundering reaffirmation that the crown proves the king, that rebellion is matricide, that foreign claims are nonsense, that

Nought shall make us rue
If England to itself do rest but true!
(V, vii, 117-118)

Thus we see that England is the real hero of King John. The imagery of the play places her huge figure in the background as a standard by which kingship, rebellion, invasion, and personal morality are judged. Her symbolic representation by John and Faulconbridge gives a comprehensive dramatic unity to the total play in the curves of their corresponding careers. They have meaning and symbolic importance only when they are identified with the welfare of the true hero. Then, too, the themes and topical significances all focus in the same place: the need for national unity.

England as the hero crowns and redeems the play, imparting to it a unity and balance of structure generally denied it. She is the personified theme of King John, represented in their better moments by John and Faulconbridge. She is the focus of the problems and arguments of the play. Finally, as we shall see in the next chapter, she is the only suitable opponent to the villain of King John.

CHAPTER IX

WHO IS THE VILLAIN?

If England is the protagonist of King John, then we might very well inquire into the identity of the antagonist; for if the nation itself is to stand as the hero of a drama filled with conflict, then a villain of large proportions should exist to serve as its opponent. The establishment of such a figure will further serve to emphasize England's role in the play.

There are several hints which aid in identifying the villain. First of all, the same imagery which suggests England as the hero also suggests two possible candidates for the villain--France and Commodity--both of whom oppose England. Secondly, in the respective rise and fall of John and the Bastard the key decisions which determine their courses are based on an acceptance or a rejection of Commodity as a ruling standard of morality. John decides that personal advantage requires the death of Arthur, and Faulconbridge ignores self-interest in choosing to aid in England's defense. Then again, in the various sub-themes of the play, Commodity plays a far more active part than France does.

The character of Commodity is carefully described by Faulconbridge in his famous speech at the close of Act II, scene i. He is a "purpose changer" who whispers in the ear of France (566-567), a "sly divel" (567), a "broker" who breaks the head of faith (568), a "daily break-vow" that wins from everyone (569), a "smooth-fac'd gentleman" (573), "the

bias of the world" (574), "advantage" (577), a "vile drawing bias" (577), a "sway of motion" which makes the world rush away from all impartiality (578-579), a "bawd" (582), and an "all-changing word" (582).

It is true that France is presented as an enemy of England, but Commodity is consistently presented as the personified standard of vested self-interest which controls all of the enemies of England. As such, he is the villain of the play, England's supremely dangerous opponent. Faulconbridge is the device which Shakespeare uses to strip the villain of his disguise.¹ Almost every character in King John is a servant or ally of Commodity. Arthur seems to be the one major exception, for he represents innocence in a self-seeking world. He has the right to the throne of England, but he is a weak and powerless child who is a pawn in the hands of others. Arthur would have been the type of ruler that Tudor Englishmen feared the most, for they were aware of the troubles which attended the reign of Henry VI, another child-king.² Arthur's lack of self-interest is shown in Act II. John tells him:

Arthur of Britain, yield thee to my hand;
And out of my dear love I'll give thee more
Than e'er the coward hand of France can win:
Submit thee boy.

(II, i, 156-159)

Geoffrey's son cannot answer John, because he is too green in the political world to make a decision. His innocence is revealed as he says to his mother: "I am not worth this coil that's made for me" (II, i, 165).

¹Palmer, p. 329.

²Ridner, Patterns In Shakespearean Tragedy, pp. 39-40.

Constance, however, has no qualms about taking what the "hand of France can win." Her selfishness is masked under the guise of doting motherhood. Her insult to Eleanor probably says more about her than it says about the queen:

Out insolent! thy bastard shall be king,
That thou mayst be a queen, and check the world!
(II, i, 118-119)

Constance does not see Commodity as the "bias of the world"; thus, she is ignorant of its pervasiveness. She sees it in John, but not in herself. Perhaps she follows self-interest unconsciously.³ Nevertheless, it is obviously Constance's will for power that causes her to ally Arthur with England's enemies. This appeal to a foreign power for aid in supporting Arthur's rights causes her to be estranged from all the natural sympathy of the audience,⁴ and decidedly places both her and Arthur in opposition to the well-being of England. Constance demonstrates her service of Commodity after Angiers when she speaks of her need and the loss of a kingdom. It is remarkable how little her thoughts turn directly to Arthur and how much they turn to her widowed lot.⁵ Therefore, we may conclude that the standard of morality served by Constance is not that of national honor, and, as a result, she becomes an enemy of England.

France, of course, approaches her relationship with England as a servant of Commodity, and throughout the play she gives evidence of her servitude in the persons of Philip and the Dauphin. The French king

³Calderwood, p. 343.

⁴Boas, p. 240.

⁵Ibid., p. 245.

cares nothing for Arthur's right. John rules a number of French provinces, and if Philip is successful in helping Arthur, perhaps he can claim some or all of these territories. Arthur would probably give them in exchange for French assistance.⁶ When the treaty with John promises the same thing, Philip immediately acknowledges his worship of "that daily break-vow" by breaking his promise to Arthur. Then when Pandulph urges him to break his newly-made alliance with John, he does so because it is in the interests of France to obey the Pope. The Bastard's speech tells us that France is in service to the villain of the play.

Commodity's chief devotee in the play is Pandulph, a sly "purpose-changer" and a swaying bias in his own right. Shakespeare presents him merely as another self-seeking politician. If Shakespeare's dispassionate irony makes him suffer more than the other politicians, it is "only because his moral pretensions are higher and therefore less consistent with his behaviour."⁷ He is a worldly prelate who plays the world's game,⁸ "an eminent public person who assumes that God can be made to serve his turn in the manipulation of human affairs."⁹

He enters because John has offended the supremacy of the Church, and John answers him as Elizabethan England would have.¹⁰ Because the treaty of peace between France and England opposes the self-interest of Rome, Pandulph dissolves it, persuading Philip that by breaking his oath he will really be keeping his promise.¹¹ His speech to Philip is an

⁶Canning, pp. 54-55.

⁷Palmer, p. 331.

⁸Knights, p. 29.

⁹Palmer, p. 333.

¹⁰Stopford Brooke, p. 237.

¹¹Palmer, p. 331.

example of the finest-woven casuistry.¹² It is also a striking example of service to Commodity:

So mak'st thou faith an enemy to faith
 And like a civil war set'st oath to oath,
 Thy tongue against thy tongue. O, let thy vow
 First made to heaven, first be to heaven perform'd,
 That is, to be the champion of our Church.
 What since thou swor'st is sworn against thyself
 And may not be performed by itself,
 For that which thou has sworn to do amiss
 Is not amiss when it is truly done,
 And being not done, where doing tends to ill,
 The truth is then most done by not doing it.
 The better act of purposes mistook
 Is to mistake again; though indirect,
 Yet indirection thereby grown direct,
 And falsehood falsehood cures, as fire cools fire
 Within the scorched veins of one new-burn'd.
 It is religion that doth make vows kept,
 But thou hast sworn against religion:
 By what thou swear'st against the thing thou swear'st,
 And mak'st an oath the surety for thy truth!
 Against an oath the truth thou art unsure.
 To swear--swears only not to be forsworn!--
 Else what a mockery should it be to swear?
 But thou dost swear only to be forsworn,
 And most forsworn, to keep what thou dost swear.
 (III, i, 189-213)¹³

Thus Pandulph argues for the dissolution of honorable faith between men for the sake of papal policy. He goes on to conclude his statement speciously with Rome's repeated threat of spiritual doom and national ruin.¹⁴ Since Philip fears Rome more than England, he agrees to break the new treaty and fight for Rome.

Philip's decision proves to be disastrous for France, however, for John's forces rout the French and capture Arthur. Nevertheless,

¹²Stopford Brooke, p. 232.

¹³Most editors have III, i, 263-287.

¹⁴Ibid.

Pandulph appears cheerful as the French evaluate their defeat: "Courage and Comfort! all shall yet go well" (III, iii, 4).¹⁵ After King Philip leaves, the legate gives the reason for his optimism. He turns his attention toward Lewis and exercises his "prophetic spirit," telling the Dauphin that John will kill Arthur and that the English will turn against their king because of that vicious act. Then, he says, any small advantage which presents itself against John will be welcomed by the English; they will revolt against John and will accept Lewis' claim of Blanche's and Arthur's right to rule. In fact, Pandulph argues, if the Dauphin will but approach England, John will kill Arthur, and Lewis' claims will be strengthened.¹⁶

Act III undoubtedly shows Pandulph's utter lack of morality as he seeks to further his own vested interest. His service of Commodity is unqualified as he purports to move heaven and threatens to move hell in support of his cause. When he sees that Philip is not anxious to rush to Rome's side, he waits for an opportune moment and practices his considerable wiles on the green young Dauphin. It is interesting to note that while denouncing John, Pandulph does not favor the claims of Arthur.¹⁷ It is obvious that Arthur is too weak to be a good ally; and in his cool cynicism, the Legate shows no pity for the young prince; yet Pandulph does not hesitate to urge Lewis' appropriation of Arthur's

¹⁵Most editors have III, iv, 4.

¹⁶Knights, p. 29.

¹⁷Canning, p. 58.

right when it is to his advantage to do so. His sinister arguments show that there is no political morality in any claim by Lewis to the English throne.¹⁸

But Lewis' ambitions will be sacrificed by Pandulph in the fourth and fifth acts, as the prelate illustrates how completely he is dedicated to the service of Commodity. He connives with the English lords, makes peace with John, and then tries to stop the Dauphin from carrying out the very expedition which he himself had so craftily urged before. He says to John:

It was my breath that blew this tempest up,
 Upon your stubborn usage of the pope;
 But since you are a gentle convertite
 My tongue shall hush again this storm of war,
 And make fair weather in your blust'ring land.
 On this Ascension-day, remember well,
 Upon your oath of service to the pope,
 Go I to make the French lay down their arms.
(V, i, 17-24)

He has coerced Philip into breaking his oath to his ally, influenced the English nobles to break their oath of allegiance to their king, and has forced John into violating the vow which he swore in defiance of Rome. His attempt to change the purpose of the Dauphin, however, is frustrated. Lewis is no longer a neophyte in the political arena. He has learned the rudiments of his own policy from Pandulph's service to Commodity. Now when the Legate asks him to make peace with John, Lewis angrily replies:

¹⁸Irving Ribner, "Shakespeare's History Plays Revisited, Bulletin de la Faculté des Lettres de Strasbourg, XLIII (May-June, 1965), 860.

You taught me how to know the face of right,
 Acquainted me with interest to this land,
 Yea, thrust this enterprise into my heart;
 And come ye now to tell me John hath made
 His peace with Rome? What is that peace to me?
 (V, ii, 88-92)

Pandulph has deliberately played on the Dauphin's self-interest; now Lewis replies that John's peace with Rome does not change his strategy.

When Lewis does decide to end his invasion of England, he again makes his decision on the basis of self-interest. The sinking of his supply vessels has left him in a precarious position, and his danger has been increased because the turncoat nobles have returned to John after discovering Lewis' plan to have them killed--another of the Dauphin's policies dictated by Commodity.

Thus, both Pandulph and his once-eager disciple continuously serve Commodity. Their decisions are based on policies of self-interest which are opposed to the well-being of England. They ultimately conflict with each other because their policies serve different faces of Commodity. Pandulph asks Lewis to leave England because the legate's purposes in Act V are best served by having a submissive John as King of England. Lewis, of course, wants to continue his attempt to win England for himself--the course of action originally urged on him by Pandulph. Lewis and any other potential foreign invaders are challenged by the play's closing speech:

Now these her princes are come home again
 Come the three corners of the world in arms
 And we shall shock them! Nought shall make us rue
 If England to itself do rest but true!
 (V, vii, 115-118)

Other characters in King John also make important decisions which show their servitude to Commodity. The English barons, for example, appear to be righteously indignant in leaving John after the second coronation; yet, in their next appearance on the stage (IV, iii) they show that they have already been in contact with Pandulph and that they are scheming to protect themselves instead of England. Salisbury speaks of Pandulph as he enters:

Lords, I will meet him at Saint Edmundsbury:
It is our safety, and we must embrace
This gentle offer of the perilous time.
(IV, iii, 11-13)

Having already decided that fighting against John is the safest path for them, the nobles are actually looking for a pretext by which they can separate themselves from allegiance to John. Their immediate discovery of the body of Arthur provides this excuse, and they hasten to meet the Dauphin.

Thus, at the very point in the play where Faulconbridge decides to defend England at all costs, the English peers are guided by Commodity to fight against England for their own selfish purposes. They align themselves with Lewis, who has assumed Arthur's role, and whom Shakespeare has already demonstrated to be inimical to England.

When Melun discloses the Dauphin's planned treachery toward them, the lords return to support John. Their decision, however, is again made on the basis of personal self-interest. They are not concerned primarily with the welfare of England, and they prove their allegiance to Commodity when they come back accompanied by Prince Henry, who is probably the insurance that their treachery will be forgiven.

Commodity is the villain of this play. He is supported by a number of villainous characters who carefully pay him homage. He breaks vows, changes purposes, substitutes expediency for right, and advocates various personal causes against England's well-being. He even corrupts England's head, for John's fall is not due to his usurpation; it is due to his worship of Commodity when he orders Arthur's death. England's ultimate salvation is wrought when Faulconbridge makes his decision to serve England instead of Commodity. If the Bastard had chosen Commodity's path of self-interest, England would have been destroyed by an alliance of treacherous forces who put their own interests above those of the nation.

CHAPTER X

CONCLUSION

H. D. F. Kitto remarks that classical scholars sometimes adversely criticize the structure of Antigone by claiming that the play lacks unity because the heroine is absent from the concluding scenes. Kitto's opinion is that the error has been committed by the critics, not by Sophocles. They have struck the wrong balance between the particular and the universal. When Antigone dies and they are left with Creon, a second-rate character, they lose interest.¹ Kitto concludes that:

The fallacy lies not in the estimate of the two characters, but in the assumption that the play is, first and foremost, a play about Antigone. The interpretation which I have summarized leaves out the gods as actors in the piece. It allows for the facts, of course, that Antigone is doing what the gods approve; it takes no account of the part in the action which Sophocles allots to them, and therefore throws the play off its balance. It gravely attenuates the amplitude of the action; it makes the play too small.²

There seem to be certain parallels between the arguments of some of the critics of Antigone, whom Kitto is confuting, and some of the critics of King John. Shakespeare's detractors seem to assume that King John is primarily a play about King John. While they are able to appreciate the bold, forceful king of the first half of the play, they are bewildered by the sudden weaknesses which appear in his characterization and by his relative insignificance in the action of the second half. Yet they take

¹Kitto, pp. 34-35.

²Ibid., p. 35.

no account of the significance of John's early demise to the overall sphere of action. They make the play "too small" and then accuse Shakespeare of faulty structure.

The truth is that some critics seem to have forgotten that King John was written not as a tragedy but rather as a chronicle play, the primary purpose of which was to teach relevant political lessons by telling a story from English history which would readily illustrate those lessons--the facts of history could even be changed if such changes would help to heighten the parallelism between the events of the past and the dangers of the present. When one examines the political teachings of King John, he finds that they all concern pertinent Elizabethan issues: possession of the crown versus the "right" to the crown, obedience to unjust law, the source of national authority, the ethics of rebellion, obedience to a foreign power, and, above all, national unity. King John is as much a dramatic commentary on these problems as it is a play about the life and death of King John. In fact, Shakespeare has taken considerable liberty with his historical sources in order to make the issues of John's reign more germane to those of Elizabeth's.

For example, Shakespeare condensed the four wars of John's reign into two conflicts. Though entirely necessary for dramatic purposes, the compression is also arranged so that it has an Elizabethan bearing, for Elizabeth faced two major challenges in her reign, one to her title and another to her crown. Elizabeth's title was disputed by Mary of Scotland, who--like Arthur--had been barred from the throne by the will

of the deceased King. Shakespeare, following the tradition of using the stage to present historical allegories, equates Arthur with Mary Queen of Scots. After Mary's execution, Elizabeth's situation was parallel to John's position following Arthur's death, as Shakespeare unhistorically represents it. The challenge to Elizabeth's crown came from her quarrel with the Pope, and Shakespeare changed the facts concerning the interdict against John to make them conform to the history of Elizabeth's excommunication.³

An investigation into Shakespeare's possible sources seems to indicate a thoroughness of study and a purposefulness of writing in King John which critics usually deny. Shakespeare did not merely rewrite The Troublesome Raigne of King John. He delved into at least two other major sources of the history of John's reign, Holinshed's Chronicles and Foxe's Actes and Monuments. He probably also consulted Historia Major by Matthew Paris, the Wakefield Chronicle, and the Chronicon Anglicanum of Ralph Coggeshall. Thus, when Shakespeare penned King John, he was not hastily completing a theatrical chore; he was deliberately composing a chronicle of John's reign that would closely parallel problems in the reign of Elizabeth.

As an English history play, King John is not great. Nevertheless, even though it does not rise to the heights of Richard II, it is in many respects an excellent chronicle play. King John is marked by careful construction, good development of characters, strong dialogue, some good speeches, and several outstanding scenes. Yet, the key to the play's

³Richard Simpson, quoted in Furness, pp. 612-613.

standing as a work of art in its own right is its dramatic unity, with England as the hero who vitally unites the various themes in the play.

With John as the hero, the play is not a dramatic whole. One reason is that the imagery of the play always presents John as being only a part of a body; he is the "mouth of England" (III, i, 78),⁴ "the foot/That leaves the print of blood where'er it walks" (IV, iii, 25-26), and the "bloody fingers' ends . . ." (III, iii, 168).⁵ Another reason is that John is not the focal point of the themes of the play. A third reason is that as a hero he fails, for in Acts IV and V he is merely another Commodity-serving politician. With John as the hero, King John itself is "a clod/ . . . of confounded royalty" (V, vii, 57-58).

It is more reasonable to view John as a defender of England, the real hero, until he puts his personal gain first and decides to have Arthur killed. Then he becomes an enemy of his country, as his cowardly submission to Pandulph demonstrates, and he authorizes Faulconbridge to become the chief defender of England.

On the other hand, the Bastard also fails as the hero of the play. He begins as an illegitimate soldier of fortune who chooses to follow Commodity, and he is John's courier throughout much of the play. But when he decides at the time of the death of Arthur to continue to support the man who wears England's crown, he is not allying himself with John so much as he is answering England's call to all her loyal sons--

⁴Most editors have III, i, 152.

⁵Most editors have III, iv, 168.

and in his response to her call Faulconbridge shows himself morally superior to John.

Yet, even after the Bastard's rise to the position of the nation's chief defender in Act V, he is not the protagonist of the drama, for he continues in his role as the eternal servant. On the personal level, he is still scorned by the nobles, and militarily is not completely successful, but morally he maintains England's national interests until others come to insure England's victory.

That support appears, however, because England is the true hero of the play. Melun confesses the French treachery because his grandfather was an Englishman. This piece of horrifying information causes the English nobles to defect; and when the French supply fleet is destroyed, Lewis is left stranded in an increasingly hostile countryside. Thus, his final withdrawal is caused by England, not simply by Faulconbridge alone.

England is the only possible hero of King John. The imagery of the play insists on it, and the plot demands it. The subject of King John is the well-being of England, the salvation of the body politic. In the first part of the play John ably defends England from external enemies, but he begins to fall when he decides to put his personal gain above his country's best interests and orders Arthur's death. Faulconbridge, on the other hand, begins to rise when he decides to put the good of England above his own private gain. When John abdicates his responsibility to protect the nation, the Bastard has become morally capable of leading the efforts to preserve the national integrity of England. The

corresponding curves of the careers of John and Faulconbridge as England's defenders give a comprehensive dramatic unity to the plot of the play.

The main theme of King John is national unity, and it draws together the important sub-themes of the play. The hero, England, is the embodiment of this theme, opposing Commodity, the villain who constantly threatens the welfare of England.

For all these reasons, we conclude that England is the true hero of King John. Such an interpretation clarifies the topical references, imagery, and themes; and it also leads to an appreciation of the balanced structure, careful characterization, and total dramatic artistry of the play. To view England as the hero is to see the dramatic emphasis of the play in its proper perspective. The critics are mistaken when they make John or Faulconbridge the hero and then degrade the play for having faulty structure. Without England as the hero, the amplitude of the action is gravely attenuated, and the structure of the play is senseless. With England as the hero, and Commodity the villain, King John becomes a unified dramatic whole, a respectable work of art in its own right.

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