

Shakespeare's Second Thoughts?

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THE TRADITIONAL REPUTATION of King Richard III is based largely, as we well know, on the account written by More and the play by Shakespeare. The trustworthiness or otherwise of More has long been discussed. So far as 'the immortal bard' is concerned, the un-historicity of much of his *Life and Death of King Richard III* needs no rehearsal. But as a work of fiction on a historical subject its influence is abiding, since even devotees of King Richard have to acknowledge that as a play it is highly effective; written about 1591 or '2, it is one of Shakespeare's early masterpieces. Shakespeare followed a classical Renaissance formula for a good moral tale: his hero is nobly born and endowed with the martial virtues, but is led astray by ruthless ambition; he pursues his path to the pinnacle of success only to be overtaken by the inevitable retribution. Nor should one suggest that Shakespeare was indifferent to historical truth provided he could relate a good story. Not only did he dramatise what passed for history at the time, but he probably believed it when he wrote it. But the purpose of this article is to ask: Did Shakespeare ever have second thoughts?

Two observations need to be made. The first is that although painters and sculptors may produce more than one masterpiece on the same theme — Raphael painted the Madonna and Child countless times, Michelangelo carved three Pictas — it is virtually unknown for a great writer to use the same story twice. The last thing one could expect Shakespeare to write would be a second *Richard III*. The other is that even if he had come into possession of the facts (or some of them) as we now know them, it would have been as difficult for him to present them to the public in late Tudor England' as for a dissident Soviet writer today to produce a play rehabilitating Rasputin. Plays at the Globe Theatre were not abstract works of art. They often drew popularity from exploiting topical themes, usually in a thinly disguised form — contemporary events were suggested by a similar theme from a different country or epoch. A play already written could be revived if it seemed topical, as Shakespeare's *Richard II* was at the time of the Earl of Essex's rebellion in 1601.² But the fate of Thomas Kyd' was a warning to dramatists to take care not to offend authority openly. Supposing Shakespeare had wanted to tell again the story of an uncle who took the throne in despite of the rights of his

elder brother's son, took advantage of the latter being only a child, imprisoned him, was tempted to murder him but refrained from doing so, but whose reign and reputation were fatally damaged by suspicion of murder, he had an ideal theme ready to hand from English history: the story of King John and Prince Arthur. Are there any grounds for thinking that Shakespeare might have used it to say what he really thought about Richard III?

There is a complication to this question, and one which is well known to literary scholars, namely, the relationship of Shakespeare's *King John* to a contemporary play on the same subject, *The Troublesome Reign of King John*. *The Troublesome Reign* (as this play will henceforth be called) is usually thought to have been the earlier, written about 1591 (the same year as Shakespeare's *Richard III*) and used as a source-play by Shakespeare about three years later. Some scholars have argued that Shakespeare's play was the earlier, and was used as a source for *The Troublesome Reign*.⁴ As to the authorship of *The Troublesome Reign*, some scholars have thought that Shakespeare himself had a hand in it; others have attributed it variously to Marlowe, Greene, Peele and Lodge.⁵ These questions are beyond the competence of the present writer, and they do not affect the main point: that in the 1590's there were two plays in production which treat the story of King John and Prince Arthur in an essentially similar way; that the later play is probably Shakespeare's and was written after *Richard III*; and that some of the dramatic facts fit the historical situation of King John and Arthur less well than they would those of Richard III and Edward V.

That both *The Troublesome Reign* and Shakespeare's *King John* were topical plays has long been recognised. Perhaps it is more obvious in *The Troublesome Reign*. An English King defies the Pope and seizes the goods of the monks to support his wars: this is a clear reminder of Henry VIII.⁶ England needs to stand united against the threat of foreign invasion:

If England's peers and people join in one

Nor Pope, nor France, nor Spain can do them wrong.

(*Troublesome Reign* II lines 1195-6).

An invasion of England by the united forces of a Catholic league was one of the nightmares of Tudor England — neither playwright or audience would bother that in King John's time, Spain did not exist as a united country.

The disputed succession between John and Arthur has also been long recognised by scholars as topical, though they fail to agree on its exact significance. The usual suggestion is a reference to the rival claims of Queen Elizabeth I and Mary, Queen of Scots.⁷ But apart from being a disputed succession, there is no parallel in the situations. Elizabeth, as the daughter of Henry VIII, was clearly the senior in descent, and only if her legitimacy was called in question (as it was by Pope Pius V) could the Scottish Queen's claims be seriously advanced. If the roles had been reversed by a successful Catholic coup in 1558 or 1570, some parallel could be found between the dramatic situation and contemporary history. But it seems curious that critics have strained the facts to find a parallel with Elizabeth and Mary while ignoring a much more obvious parallel: a situation involving an uncle and a nephew just over a century before.

It would be interesting to know what the impact of the opening lines of

The Troublesome Reign had on the audience:

God and Fortune have bereft from us
Victorious Richard.

(I lines 2-3)

The same question can be asked about the conclusion:

Thus England's peace begins in Henry's reign
And bloody wars are closed in happy league.

(II lines 1185-6)

Is it imaginative to suggest that these lines were calculated to stir thoughts of 1485 as much as 1199-1216?

Arthur's claim to the throne is advanced in both *The Troublesome Reign* and *King John* by his mother Constance of Brittany, whose role is reminiscent of that of Elizabeth Woodville:

Arthur, my son, heir to thy elder brother,
Without ambiguous shadow of descent
Is sovereign to the substance thou withholdest.

(*Troublesome Reign* I lines 512-4)

Here the dramatist faced a problem. How was John's claim to the throne to sound plausible to an audience of the 1590's used (as England of 1189 was not) to the peaceful succession of nearest heir? *The Troublesome Reign*, following Holinshed,⁹ bases John's claim on a will of Richard I (I l. 518). But Shakespeare realised that his audience would find this unconvincing. Henry VIII had made a will which strengthened the claims of his two daughters (whose legitimacy was open to question) to succeed his son. But the throne was not the King's to will away from the rightful heirs.¹⁰ Shakespeare is more convincing in dispossessing his Arthur through doubts about his legitimacy; Queen Eleanor, John's mother, retorts to Constance:

Out, insolent! thy bastard shall be king
That thou mayst be a queen, and check the world.

(Act II, Scene i).

Arthur of Brittany's legitimacy was not open to question, but a parallel suggests itself with the bastardisation of Edward IV's children which opened the way to Richard III and thwarted Elizabeth Woodville's ambitions to 'check the world'. Arthur was

... but young, and yet unmeet to reign

(*Troublesome Reign* I line 759)

but though inconvenient, his youth was no more a good reason for barring him from the throne than was Edward V's.

If a comment may, therefore, be read between the lines of *The Troublesome Reign* and even more Shakespeare's *King John* on the respective claims of Richard III and Edward V, they offer an even more interesting hint as to the fate of the latter. Arthur was captured waging war against his uncle with the King of France; he was imprisoned, but his subsequent fate is unknown — a situation close enough to furnish a parallel with Edward V. The fate of Prince Arthur is an unsolved mystery which historians have been content to leave as such. Holinshed, on whom the dramatists relied heavily, and who was much in vogue in Tudor times, offered three possibilities:

1. That Arthur attempted to escape from the castle at La Falaise, fell into the Seine and drowned;
2. That he pined away and died of natural sickness;
3. That he was secretly murdered.

In *The Troublesome Reign*, the nobility urge John to release Arthur
Whose durance darkeneth your Highness' right
As if you kept him prisoner, to the end
Yourself were doubtful of the thing you have.

(I lines 1569-71).

John, however, is uncertain, and in both *The Troublesome Reign* and Shakespeare's play, he orders Hubert de Burgh to blind the boy. Hubert cannot bring himself to do this, to his uncle's eventual relief. But in both plays, Arthur is killed while trying to escape, though he falls while attempting a leap, he does not, as in Holinshed, drown in the Seine." The death of Arthur in both plays is remarkable, both in deviating from the historical sources, and in being dramatically unsatisfying. The nobles find Arthur's body, conclude that he has been murdered, and revolt; in *The Troublesome Reign*, John dies saying

I must be damned for Arthur's sudden death

(II line 1051).

There can be little doubt that opposition to both King John and Richard III drew strength from the suspicion in some quarters (whether well founded or not) that they had murdered their respective nephews. John fails to be a really convincing villain, like the dramatic Richard III. Shakespeare was not above altering his sources for the sake of a good story," and it is surprising that he did not make the story more powerful by taking Holinshed's third option, having John secretly murdering his nephew, and repenting too late of a crime which brings him to disaster.

The interesting thing about the death of Arthur in these two plays is that although historically improbable and dramatically ineffective, it is the kind of death by which Edward V may have died. If the More story be rejected, what other possibilities are there? One is that recorded by Du Bellay in his *Memoires*,² that the ex-king and his brother died 's' étant précipités du hault du pont le quel entre dedans la Tour."

The argument, then, may be summed up as follows. In the 1590s, two plays were in production on King John's reign, both of which are agreed to have topical references to Tudor affairs under the guise of events four centuries earlier, and among these, the relationship of King John and Arthur appears closer to that of Richard III and Edward V than to any in Tudor times, the Tudors having a total absence of royal uncles. As the quotations have shown, the veiled references seem to be stronger in *The Troublesome Reign*. If this were the earlier play, as is generally thought, Shakespeare could have afforded to tone down some of the hints if his audience were already familiar with the formula John + Arthur = Richard + Edward, though as has been seen, Shakespeare sharpens the resemblance with the reference to the nephew's bastardy. Both plays have Arthur dying in a way which accords ill with the facts, but which might fit the circumstances of Edward V's death.

The parallels between the dramatic Arthur and the historic Edward may of course be coincidental; or Shakespeare may have taken them over from the earlier play without realising their implications. Either would seem to be very naive; Tudor drama was a serious, even a dangerous vocation. It is interesting that *King John* was never published in Shakespeare's lifetime." There are various possible reasons for this, but one is that he did not wish the text to be scrutinised too closely by the authorities.

Supposing, however, that the parallels are intended, why should they

appear in two plays in the 1590s? The centenary of Bosworth in 1485 does not seem a very plausible starting-point; the Tudor age seems to have been less centenary-conscious than we are. On the other hand, the dynasty enjoyed a remarkable improvement of fortune soon after the centenary. The Spanish Armada was defeated in 1588, the Protestant Henry of Navarre ascended the French throne in 1589, thus removing the threat of foreign invasion. Elizabeth's chief rival, the Catholic Mary had been eliminated in 1587, leaving the young Scottish Protestant King as the most likely heir. In an atmosphere of national security and serenity for the first time for a century, the thought, unthinkable in a time of national crisis, started to come to the surface: Had the dynasty really, as it claimed, delivered the country from a monster of iniquity? The fact that William Cornwaleys and Sir George Buck published their criticisms of the official version so soon after Elizabeth I's death¹ suggests that some had been thinking the thought while she was still alive, though it would still have been fool-hardy to have said so openly.

Finally, if Shakespeare did make a guarded retraction over Richard III in *King John*, it is not difficult to suggest what — or rather who — may have prompted him. By 1593, he had come under the patronage of the young Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton. As the affair over *Richard II* in 1601 shows, Southampton was well aware of the possibility of using the drama as a political weapon. The family were, moreover, an interesting link with Richard III. Sir John Wriothesley, great-grandfather of Shakespeare's patron, became Garter King-of-Arms in 1479 and was the first official head of Richard III's College of Arms. The Wriothesleys sailed skilfully with the wind with the accession of the Tudors, but with all their time-serving, they may have known that Richard III was not as black as he had been painted. If so, Shakespeare's *King John* is the only hint that has been discovered that they made their views known.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. William Cornwaleys and Sir George Buck published works under James I critical of the Tudor portrayal of Richard III (Paul Murray Kendall, *Richard III*, London 1955, p.427). John Ford's play *Perkin Warbeck* (1634) at least allows that Warbeck thought he was Richard, Duke of York.
2. Shakespeare's patron, Lord Southampton, paid 40s to the players of the Globe Theatre to revive *Richard II*. Queen Elizabeth was being compared to Richard II, and Southampton spent the rest of her reign in the Tower.
3. Author of *The Spanish Tragedy* (1592) and other plays. He was tortured and imprisoned for his religious views—or lack of them.
4. Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (London and New York 1962), vol. 4, p.4.
5. *Ibid.*
6. The historic King John, unlike his dramatic counterpart, despoiled the secular clergy as well as the monks.
7. Bullough, *op. cit.*, pp.1-2. Bullough quotes the views of other scholars, but writes: 'It is hard to believe that the audience was intended to see much further resemblance between the weakling John, whose own mother called him a usurper, and the Queen who got the throne rightfully as the third heir of her father; or between Mary, Queen of Scots, and Prince Arthur.'
8. Bullough, *op. cit.*, p.25.

9. The Duke of Northumberland induced Edward VI to make a will in favour of Lady Jane Grey in 1553, but the episode brought both of them to the scaffold.
10. Foxe, in the *Book of Martyrs*, has Arthur fall into a ditch instead of into the river. This is the nearest to a source for the death of the stage Arthur. Bullough, *op. cit.*, pp.25 ff.
11. The most obvious example is perhaps in the ending of *King Lear*, where in the sources the King and Cordelia defeat Goneril and Regan and are happily restored to fortune.
12. Du Bellay, *Memoires* liv.i., quoted by J. Gairdner, *Letters and Papers illustrative of the reigns of Richard III and Henry VII* (London 1861), p.127. Gairdner offers this as a plausible explanation put out to explain their deaths, adding that it would probably have been while trying to escape, and at night.
13. I have indicated elsewhere (*The Ricardian*, Vol. 5, no. 73, pp.341-4) that I believe Richard, Duke of York to have survived Richard III. But if his elder brother alone had died in 1483 while trying to leave the Tower (probably in connection with Buckingham's conspiracy) it could explain Richard's well-known dilemma: to produce the younger prince alone would have increased suspicion that his elder brother had been murdered; to produce the elder prince's body would have increased the suspicion of murder while making the younger prince the focus for conspiracy.
14. *Oxford Companion to English Literature* (Oxford 1985): *King John*.
15. See n.1 above.