

John Bale's *King John* (Cultures of Performance in Medieval and Early Modern Europe), directed by Russell Bender at St Stephen's Church, Canterbury, UK. 20 February 2019.

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Despite the historical King John's reputation as a despotic and wilful ruler, in his early sixteenth-century play *King John*, John Bale presents him as a proto-Protestant martyr seeking to protect Widow England from the dangers of the Catholic church, represented by allegorical figures such as Sedition, Dissimulation, Private Wealth, and Usurped Power. In a now classic study of Bale, Peter Happé observes that the play demonstrates the author's technical dramatic skill. He further wonders how 'performance skills would have enhanced the text' and suggests that the first performances 'would have been very effective'.¹ Indeed, at least one early sixteenth-century observer found *King John* very affecting, feeling that it showed the chronicles were 'nothing true' and the king was 'as noble a prince as ever was in England'.²

As with many early Tudor plays, *King John* has a very limited history in modern performance, and its reception has been more equivocal. In 1907 the Ipswich Literary Society staged an amateur revival at the town lecture hall. The local newspaper praised the doubling and the blocking of 'impressive and admirable' scenes, even as it observed that the drama required an 'eliminatory process' to downplay the more scatological and vitriolic lines, thus making it 'suitable for performance before a modern audience'.³ In 1957 John Barton adapted the play for the series *The First Stage*, broadcast on BBC's Third Programme. One listener politely commented that the 'spirited acting' saved an otherwise 'dull' play, while another remarked more candidly, 'For once, listening to a play did not make it more interesting'.⁴

Given this modern reception, we may ask whether the play might still speak to modern audiences. On the evidence of the most recent production, at St Stephen's Church (Canterbury, UK), the answer is yes, but not in ways we might initially expect. Produced by English faculty in the University of Kent's Cultures of Performance research cluster (Sarah Dustagheer, Rory Loughnane, and Clare Wright), this event used the play to examine the interaction of dramatic text and space of performance. Many plays from the period might have worked, but this event centred on *King John* because of its local connections. In 1538 it was performed for Thomas Cranmer, then archbishop of Canterbury. Evidence exists of

a possible performance in the same year at Place House, the one-time residence of the archdeacons of Canterbury, once located in the St Stephen's parish quite near the church itself. Besides proximity to some of the play's earliest performance sites, the nine-hundred-year-old church was a suitable venue because it bears physical traces of the Reformation debates that prompted Bale to write his play in the first place. Modern stained-glass windows and whitewashed walls stand in place of what late-1530s Protestant reformers like Bale would have deemed the church's medieval, idolatrous, Catholic religious art.

In light of this history, one notable feature of the production was the projection of surviving medieval church paintings onto the chancel arch, evoking what the church might have looked like on the eve of the Reformation. Curated by Howard Griffin, Rafaella Siagkri, and Emily Guerry of Kent's Schools of History and Architecture, the images included two Doom paintings and a Last Judgment, all dating from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries. In addition to literally adding colour to the space, the projections evoked the sense of doom that might have permeated the church in the mid- to late-1530s as churchgoers contended with the religious changes unfolding around them. Several moments highlighted connections between images and action. Early in the play, for instance, Sedition (Carl Heap) observes that he was born 'under the pope in the holy cyte of Rome, / And there wyll I swell vn to the daye of dome', even as he pointed to the first Doom painting projected on the arch (183–4).⁵ Dissimulation (Rosie Thomson) later pointed to the Last Judgment projection as he described deceiving the faithful with Latin, clerical robes, and 'images of Seynt Spryte and seynt Savyer', thus calling attention to the critique of church images implicit in the text (708–9).

With direction by Russell Bender, the blocking also reinforced connections between play and place. The main playing space was at the top of the nave, centred between the north and south transepts, which spatially emphasized the play's questions about who mediates between the people and God. The actors also used other parts of the church effectively. In the opening moments, King John (Nigel Shunt) walked forward from the sanctuary, thus signalling his association with true faith and God. Widow England (Rosie Bender), by contrast, entered from the back of the nave, walking up the aisle to plead her case to the King, thereby associating her with the plight of the people, suffering (in the view of the play) the tyranny of the Catholic church. Sedition first entered by the south transept, but then walked into the nave to converse from there with the King and Widow, sometimes leaning on a pew or moving among the audience in the pews themselves, signaling his status as an outsider (neither God nor people) and crafty threat to the congregation.

The performance was in a practice-as-research mode rather than a full production. At St Stephen's, the production involved limited rehearsals (just two on the day), and the performance itself was a staged reading of selected scenes, with only one prop (a throne-like chair) and the actors in modern street clothes. Between the selections, researchers offered brief overviews of John Bale, the play's reformation contexts, and the images. The event closed with an audience questionnaire about reactions to the space before and after the event. The three selections gave a good sense of major moments in the plot. In addition to the opening scenes between King John, Widow England, and Sedition, the second excerpt dealt with the conspiratorial meeting of Sedition, Dissimulation, Private Wealth (Eleanor Tomlin), and Usurped Power (Graham Jackson). The third featured King John giving up his crown to Sedition and Private Wealth, who at the end demonstrated their dominance by standing on either side of the throne. Given the difficulty of Bale's language and short rehearsal time, all of the actors (a mixture of professional, student, and amateur actors) performed admirably, but they were very definitely on book, with the emphasis more on the dynamics of the play within the space than on language or characterization.

The production ultimately worked to transform the space of St Stephen's, calling to mind the very religious upheavals of the sixteenth century that impacted the church's physical appearance today. As researchers noted on their project blog shortly after the production, the audience, including academics, actors, and members of the St Stephen's worship community, connected the play to this history and to modern times.⁶ For instance, one respondent lamented the loss of art that attended the Reformation. At the same time, prompted by the questionnaire to consider also present-day meanings, respondents also linked the play to Brexit, seeing Bale's play as vehement proto-, pro-Brexit polemic. Even if *King John* may not be the liveliest drama for modern audiences, it nevertheless continues to resonate. By returning the play to a performance environment evocative of its sixteenth-century contexts, this production activated *King John's* contemporary reverberations with present-day concerns about Britain's place in Europe and the vitriol of political polemic.

Notes

- 1 Peter Happé, *John Bale*, Twayne English Authors Series (New York, 1996), 106.
- 2 Qtd. in *ibid.*, 106.
- 3 'Ipswich Literary Society', *Evening Star*, 13 February 1907, 4.

- 4 Audience Research Report, *The First Stage* — Programme 9: Late Moralities, Week 24 (2 July 1957). BBC Written Archives Centre, File S452/32/1, Document LR/57/969, 2.
- 5 John Bale, *King Johan*, ed. Barry Adams (San Marino, 1969).
- 6 Cultures of Performance, 'Bale's "King John" at St Stephen's Church, Canterbury', *Cultures of Performance Blog*, 4 March 2019, <https://research.kent.ac.uk/performancecultures/2019/03/04/bales-king-john-at-st-stephens-church-canterbury/>.