

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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King Johan 1536 (and other works)

John Bale 1495-1563

General background

John Bale was a voluminous sixteenth century British author, clergyman (ultimately Bishop of Ossuary in Ireland) and aggressive anti-Catholic cleric and propagandist. At the age of twelve he joined the Carmelite monastic order. In 1529, while still a monk, he entered Jesus College, Oxford, from which he emerged with a Bachelor of Divinity degree.

In 1553 Bale abandoned the monastic life entirely, and with vehemence: 'that I might no more serve so execrable a beast.' He went on, as he said, to marry a much more attractive wife and to spend the remainder of his life as a vehement anti-Catholic clergy man. (Not simply anti-Catholic for that matter, but doctrinaire Protestant, meaning he laid great weight on such convictions as that Joseph of Arimathea, who took away Jesus' shroud after the Crucifixion, had first brought the shroud of Jesus to England; or that in describing the outfits to be worn by the characters in one of his morality plays the suggestion could properly be made that we should 'let Idolatry be decked out like an old witch, sodomy like a monk of all sects, ambition like a Bishop, consciousness like a Pharisee, fake doctrine like a popish doctor, and hypocrisy like a gray friar.'

Such fantastic thinking and opprobrious language were destined to bring Bale into much future conflict with the religious authorities, whether Catholic, in its transition out of power or new Protestant dominance, which would ride high under Queen Elizabeth. It will surprise no one that Bale and his family spent a good six years in European exile, avoiding the long hand of the Catholic Church.

This same John Bale made himself noteworthy for writing 'the first historical verse drama in English,' an achievement of significance for more reasons than one. (He celebrated the thirteenth century monarch, King John, who had hitherto been broadly viewed as a loser--the Barons forced him to sign the Magna Carta and international politics forced him to lose much of Britain to France; he gave evidence of his own literary self-consciousness by reaching, into his own past to recreate an historical period, and ennobled a figure, through whom he could enforce his own stark Protestantism. Finally, Bale entered into the developing history of British drama--well before quasi historical work like *Gorboduc* (1561).

Bale also devoted himself to other genres of writing: miracle or brief mystery plays, in shaggy expository blank verse, in which he expounded his belligerent anti-papism. Finally he created what was probably his most remarkably useful contribution, his *Index Illustrorum Britanniae scriptorium* (1548-49, *Index of Famous British Writers*, a list of noteworthy texts and manuscripts of British authors of the past. The peculiar value of this work derives from recent events in then British culture. A little explanation is needed.

Between 1536 and 1541 King Henry VIII of England 'closed every monastery and nunnery in England and Wales.' (By a so-called *valor ecclesiasticus* the King demanded from every income bearing institution in the land an account of its annual revenues. It was by stripping the monasteries of their revenue in this fashion, that they were cut off from their wealth, which itself included many priceless manuscripts. This action, of depriving many manuscript texts of their appropriate lodgings, in monastery libraries, meant that there was an exceptional need for the kind of bookkeeping and accounting work that Bale was carrying out.

Some works

King Johan

King Johan was an 'historical play' written by John Bale in 1538, 'concerning' the thirteenth century King of England, King John. (It is interesting to note that Shakespeare's own *King John* (1623) bears some virtual resemblance to Bale's play--especially because Shakespearean consciousness here reaches centuries farther back into English history than in any of the master's other 'history plays'-- to note that, given the oddities of creative consciousness, a spark of attentive energy may conceivably have passed between Bale and the Bard of Avon.) For the most part, however, Bale's play resembles little except his own cranky anti-Papism, and an unprecedented, at his time, talent for using the dramatic past as a model to make points about the present; particularly the point that the enacted past can serve as a model for future virtue.

Interestingly enough, Bale can in this respect have had additional reasons to appreciate King Johan, to whom he has turned as an example of virtue. This is the John who in fact wisely gives in to the English barons who had risen in protest against national inequalities. John puts historical awareness at the center of this drama, which concerns itself with further and deeper reasons to serve the past as a model for the present. The following lines illustrate Bale's historical encomium and respect for models, and will give us at the same time a glimpse of the kind of historical perspective Bale is making his own.

*This noble King John. and a faithful Moses,
Withstood proud Pharaoh, for her poore Israel,
But the English remained in bondage to Rome
Til that Duke Josue, which was our late King Henry,
Clearly brought us out into the land of milk and honey.*

Comedic plays; Interludes

The kind of historical thinking we see in Bale's *King John* play was, to be sure, if somewhat wooden, nonetheless part of a project to make the past live for us. The language and style available to Bale, for accomplishing this effect, is the language and stagecraft of the mystery and morality plays of the English High Middle Ages. Of such derivation is, for example, *A Comedy Concerning Three Lawe: The Three Lawe of Nature, Moses and Christ*, a three act morality play, in which God (*Deus Pater*) is the principal speaker, while the two chief interlocutors--*The Law of Nature* and *The Law of Christ*--interact with the Creator in a chorus of praises of the law, indeed of law in the widest sense, as the element which makes the cosmos work.

*Step forth ye three Lawe for guidance of mankind
Whom most entirely in heart we love and favour,
And teach him to walk according to our mind
In cleanness of life and in a gentle behavior
Deeply instruct him our mysteries to savour
By the works of faith all vices to exclude
And preserve in him our godly similitude.*

The 'comedy' continues by tracking man's needs for obedience and guidance from such designated guides as Moses, whose leadership guided us out of the wilderness, as we know from Holy Gospel. The tone is fully set by these initial lines, which earn the small drama its honors as a comedy, following both the ancient and mediaeval practices of viewing a 'happy ending' as the legitimizing capstone of a comedy.

Index Illustrorum majoris Britanniae scriptorum. An index of the distinguished writers of Great Britain.

A chronological listing of what Bale took to be the major writings in English before his time. (This listing was in its earliest stage published to cover a period of five centuries, while a later version of the list was

enlarged to cover the works of fourteen centuries, that is back to the period of *the Anglo Saxon Chronicle*). The work itself, essentially a bibliography of printed materials in Latin and English, springs from an indefatigable bibliographer, who upon leaving monastic life--and doubtless during it too--anticipated the role printing was going to play, in shaping the threats soon to be faced by the manuscript tradition.

In a wider lens

We have sampled the work of John Bale, a figure of middle magnitude in the mid-sixteenth century, a figure who entered the cultural and religious sphere of Western Europe at a time when history was opening wide around large and significant fissures. From the last decades of the fifteenth century, the deepest news of the time was the invention and gradual dissemination of the printing press. (This accomplishment was just beginning to cross fertilize with the discoveries of Newton and Galileo, horizon openers enough, already, to herald the entire new world which awaited Bale.) Born in 1495, Bale was a young man--twelve years old-- when he left home to join the Greyfriars Monastery. In that monastery he would, from the outset, have initiated youthful studies in the traditional trivium and quadrivium, the expanding initial studies in philosophy and humane letters-- chiefly Biblical oriented-- and in all of that outreaching Bale will have been encased in a religious fervor, the new intensity of Protestantism, which Bale found part of the thrilling excitement of his moment.

Bale and Poggio: an instructive comparison

John Bale, though of a sour and critical disposition--'bilious Bale' was his nickname-- and though on strict guard against any whiff of the papacy laid out before him--his experience at the Greyfriars Monastery was too much for him, though he doesn't indulge us in the reasons for his change of world view--though in short wearing a sharply critical posture within his own time, Bale does in fact strongly interact with and bear upon his time.

His bibliographies, or simply lists, of early manuscripts that he had seen, (inspected?), (Jotted down the names of?), is a priceless if indiscriminate guide to the corpus of British manuscripts known at his time. (One might want to compare Bale's single handed effort to the later large scale efforts of the British Government (British Library, 1973) or the United States Government (Library of Congress, 1800). A glimpse at the detailed entries of the most comprehensive of Bale's bibliographies--cf. *The Online Books Page* for John Bale, reflecting the Bale holdings in the Parker Library of Corpus Christi College, Oxford--will indicate the richness of manuscript detail left behind by Bale in his tireless efforts to preserve manuscripts about to be lost and dispersed, as many of them were, by King Henry's dissolution of the monasteries and their libraries.

Poggio Bracciolini, the wandering transcriptionist of Stephen Greenblatt's historical fiction, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (2011), can serve as a parallel to Bale as a brilliant and indefatigable recorder and preserver of literary historical documents on the brink. (The reader is highly advised to read Greenblatt's book.) A fascinating difference remains, between Bale and Poggio. Poggio was an antiquarian and scholar, as well as a professional transcriptionist working for his living, while Bale, also driven by the need for the preservation of manuscript history, was doing so as part of a higher effort to preserve the record of a rich Catholic tradition which he had come to despise.