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DOI
10.21039/rsj.262

Publication date
2021

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Royal Studies Journal

Citation (APA)
van Pelt, N. T. (2021). Speaking of kings and popes under the shadow of Henry VIII's Treason Act: Bale's King Johan. *Royal Studies Journal*, *8*(2), 102-123. https://doi.org/10.21039/rsj.262

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ROYAL STUDIES JOURNAL

2021 VIII

Speaking of Kings and Popes under the Shadow of Henry VIII's Treason Act: Bale's King Johan

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Speaking of Kings and Popes under the Shadow of Henry VIII's Treason Act: Bale's *King Johan*

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Abstract: The years following Henry VIII's divorce from Katherine of Aragon saw many changes in legislation that affected his subjects' positions in the realm, as well as their relationship with the divine. As Supreme Head of the Church of England, Henry had taken the ultimate authority over matters spiritual, and the 1534 Treason Act secured his subjects' compliance to the new policies by turning acting or speaking against the king, his queen, or heirs, into a capital offence. During these years, Thomas Cromwell and Thomas Cranmer were given the task to further the reformist cause, and for this they employed, among others, the polemical dramatist John Bale. However, when Bale and his 'ffelowes' performed a play called *King Johan* at Cranmer's house in 1538, King Henry was already returning to a more religiously conservative position. Furthermore, the 1538 arrests and executions of both traditionalists and evangelicals, and the publication of the king's excommunication which brought a putative threat of invasion, contributed to an atmosphere of paranoia. Yet *King Johan* is outspoken about matters of reform, and, even more dangerously, presumes to advise the king on how a monarch should rule. This paper examines the ways in which Bale refused to compromise the strength of his political argument, whilst at the same time carefully avoided crossing the boundary to treason.

Keywords: Henry VIII; Tudor drama; Thomas Cromwell; Treason Act; John Bale; *King Johan*

Thomas Cromwell was executed at Tower Hill on 28 July 1540 after being attainted of "Crimine Heresis et Lese Majestatis" [Heresy and High Treason].[1] The law he was accused of having broken was the 1534 Treason Act (26 Henry VIII, c. 13), which he himself had been responsible for drafting in aid of King Henry VIII's Great Matter.[2] It is ironic that this law should backfire on Cromwell only six years later, and that the Lord Chancellor Thomas Audley, with whom he had worked closely on this

This article is dedicated to the memory of Dr Peter Happé.

[1] *Journal of the House of Lords: Volume 1, 1509-1577* (London, 1767-1830), 149 (29 June 1540), http://www.british-history.ac.uk/lords-jrnl/vol1/p149a.

[2] This act is referred to in, among others: Steven Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage: Licence, Play, and Power in Renaissance England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 118; Greg Walker, "Folly," in *Cultural Reformations: Medieval and Renaissance in Literature History*, ed. Brian Cummings and James Simpson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 338.

legislation, should be one of his interrogators.[3] Cromwell's arrest, on 10 June 1540, appears to have been a hasty business, performed before a clear case had been made against him; indeed, it has been observed that on this day enquiries were made in France "for details of an earlier report that Cromwell declared in 1538 he would make himself king and marry the princess Mary."[4] Evidence to this effect was not produced, but the enquiry shows the avenues of thought that king and counsellors were ready to pursue in order to justify Cromwell's arrest. Also on 10 June, the French ambassador Marillac wrote to King Francis I to communicate what was apparently the formal statement on Cromwell's having been "led prisoner to the Tower."[5] In the dispatch, he writes that Cromwell, "attached to the German Lutherans," had been discovered to have worked "against the intention of the King and of the Acts of Parliament," in an attempt to replace the old faith preachers with those campaigning for the "new doctrines."[6] Marillac adds that Cromwell had even been willing to resolve to take "arms" against the king, in order to force him to accept the new doctrines, should this have been necessary.[7] Was this likely? Or did Cromwell fall victim to his own tactic, used in the trial of Anne Boleyn, to enlarge the treason charges to such levels of extremity that they became acceptable and believable to the public, which was now effectively being used against himself?

Early in the 1530s, the king had appointed Cromwell to employ all means necessary in aid of the King's Great Matter, that is, the divorce from Katherine of Aragon. The break from Rome and the subsequent legal changes pertaining to the succession and religious beliefs required Cromwell to undertake reformist action, but as has succesfully been argued, Cromwell "did not see himself as a Catholic separate from the Church, but as a Christian, who, with his King, had escaped the Pope's usurped authority."[8] This explains why in a letter to Henry VIII, dated 12 June 1540 and thus written roughly six weeks before his execution, Cromwell, when responding to charges made to him, neither confirms nor contests the heresy charges, but "Acknowledges himself a miserable sinner towards God and the King, but never wilfully."[9] Thus he pointedly refuses to label himself a heretic for his religious beliefs. As for the other charges, Cromwell, who deferentially positions himself "Prostrate at your Majesty's feet,"[10] tries to convince Henry not of his innocence, but of his good intentions. Perhaps realising that when under pressure to perform at a high level for a prolonged period of time one can make mistakes, and that one's opponents might easily explain such mistakes as wilfully committed treasonous acts, Cromwell disclaims that "for the Commonwealth, I have done my best, and

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[3] Charles Carlton, "Thomas Cromwell: A Study in Interrogation," *Albion* 5, no. 2 (Summer 1973): 118.
[4] G.R. Elton, "Thomas Cromwell's Decline and Fall," *The Cambridge Historical Journal* 10, no. 2 (1951): 177.
[5] J.S. Brewer and R.H. Brodie, eds., *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, 21 vols. (London: HMSO, 1862-1932), 15, no. 766 (10 June 1540) (Hereafter cited as *L.P.* with volume number, entry number and date).
[6] *L.P.* 15 no. 766 (10 June 1540).
[7] *L.P.* 15 no. 766 (10 June 1540).
[8] Carlton, "Thomas Cromwell: A Study in Interrogation," 126–127.
[9] *L.P.* 15 no. 776 (12 June 1540).
[10] *L.P.* 15 no. 776 (12 June 1540).

no one can justly accuse me of having done wrong willfully."[11] He also writes that, "If I heard of any combinations or offenders against the laws, I have for the most part (though not as I should have done) revealed and caused them to be punished."[12] His apology is, at the same time, a reminder of his productivity for the King's Great Matter and its aftermath: "But I have meddled in so many matters, I cannot answer all."[13] In the weeks to come, Cromwell was to write several humbly phrased letters to Henry. On 30 June he signed: "with the heavy heart and trembling hand of your Highness' most heavy and most miserable prisoner and poor slave, Thomas Crumwell. Most gracious prince, I cry for mercy, mercy, mercy!"[14] Mercy, however, was not to be had. Henry appears to have regretted and mourned Cromwell's death afterwards, and Marillac wrote in a letter to De Montmorency that, "[his ministers] he sometimes even reproaches with Cromwell's death, saying that, upon light pretexts, by false accusations, they made him put to death the most faithful servant he ever had."[15]

Recent studies of Cromwell's political career show him to have been less of a Machiavellian mastermind than has previously been thought, and more of an "executive," a servant, of the Crown.[16] As Kevin Sharpe emphasises, "Whatever the importance of his ministers such as Thomas Wolsey and Thomas Cromwell, for all the influence at times of noblemen or factions, Henry was ... a king who ruled: who confronted problems, initiated policies and made decisions."[17] G.W. Bernard has furthermore shown that Cromwell as Henry's minister concerned himself with the day to day "work of government," but that he asked "the king for guidance on how to act in all issues of importance."[18] Cromwell was responsible for drafting Parliamentary statutes, and in this way contributed to the many changes in legislation that shook the 1530s. For example, Cromwell's hand can be seen in the 1533 Act in Restraint of Appeals to Rome (24 Henry VIII, c. 12) which formalised the king's independence from outside forces, by establishing that "this Realme of Englond is an Impire, and so hath ben accepted in the worlde, govned by oon Supme heede and King having the Dignitie and Roiall Estate of the Imperiall Crowne."[19] Cromwell also drafted the 1534 Act of Supremacy (26 Henry VIII, c. 1) which confirmed the notion of the crown of England as

[11] *L.P.* 15 no. 776 (12 June 1540).
[12] *L.P.* 15 no. 776 (12 June 1540).
[13] *L.P.* 15 no. 776 (12 June 1540).
[14] *L.P.* 15, no. 823 (30 June 1540).
[15] *L.P.* 16, no. 590 (3 March 1541).
[16] See, for example, the important study by Michael Everett, *The Rise of Thomas Cromwell: Power and Politics in the Reign of Henry VIII, 1485-1534* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015). Persuasive examples of Cromwell's seeking to find out "the kinges pleasure" in various matters are found in: G.W. Bernard, "Elton's Cromwell," *History* 83, no. 272 (October 1998): 602–603.
[17] Kevin Sharpe, *Selling the Tudor Monarchy: Authority and Image in Sixteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 81.
[18] Bernard, "Elton's Cromwell," 603–604. For example, Cromwell in his personal notes can be seen to have reminded himself to ask the king "to knowe his pleasure touchyng Maister More and to declare the opynyon of the judges", or "whether Maister Fissher shall go to execucion, with also the other."
[19] T.E. Tomlins and W.E. Taunton, eds., *Statutes of the Realm*, 11 vols. (London, 1817), 3:427.

"imperial," and made official the king's power over his subjects in matters of faith.[20] The act decreed that the king and his heirs and successors should be "the onely supreme [heed] in erthe of the Church of England callyd Anglicana Ecclesia, and shall have & enjoye annexed and unyted to the Ymperyall Crowne of this Realme aswell the title and stye therof."[21] Futhermore, the king and his heirs were given full authority "to visite represse redresse reforme ordre correct restrayne and amende all suche errours heresies abuses offences contemptes and enormyties what so ever they be."[22] The Act of Supremacy also specifies that any foreign insistence to the contrary of these lawes would not be adhered to.[23] By implication, this meant that the Pope's decree on the validity of the king's marriage to Katherine of Aragon would have no legal value in England.

The Act of Supremacy can be seen as the central element to the break from Rome and the Aragon divorce; the populace, however, was not unified in its embrace of the king's marriage to Anne Boleyn. Henry and his advisors must have suspected criticism of the new legislation, as well as feared that opinions on the new queen could create discord in the country, and their pre-emptive strike took the form of the 1534 Treason Act (26 Henry VIII, c. 13) which made a capital offence out of any wish to harm or undermine the king, his queen, or their heirs. The act also limited the freedom of interpretations of monarchy, and made punishable by law a variety of acts representing the king in a way that was undesirable to the crown:

> maliciously wyshe will or desire by words or writinge, or by crafte ymagen invent practyse or attempte, any bodily harme to be donne or comytted to the Kynges ost royall psonne, the Quenes, or their heires apparaunt, or to depryve theym or any of theym of the dignite title or name of their royall estates, or sclaunderously & malyciously publishe & pnounce, by expresse writinge or wordes, that the Kynge oure Soverayn Lorde shulde be heretyke scismatike Tiraunt ynfidell or Usurper of the Crowne.[24]

That the law explicitly forbade subjects to use specific derogatory terms is tellingly defensive. Banning the words "heretyke," "scismatike," and "ynfidell" prevented critique of the king's religious reforms, whereas preventing the use of the word "Tiraunt" regulated criticism on the king's legislations more broadly. Forbidding the word "usurper" betrays the second Tudor's insecurity about his subjects' loyalty to a royal house that was still only in its second generation, and for which, so far, he had not yet sired a male heir.

In the second half of the 1530s, a politico-religious divergence began to appear

[20] *Statutes of the Realm*, 3:xxi, 492.
[21] *Statutes of the Realm*, 3:492.
[22] *Statutes of the Realm*, 3:492.
[23] *Statutes of the Realm*, 3:492.
[24] *Statutes of the Realm*, 3:508.

between Cromwell and Cranmer on the one hand and Henry on the other. Cromwell and Cranmer had been commanded to justify the schism with Rome to the populace by supporting an "anti-Papal stance," for which they had to cooperate with ardent reformers, and took to their responsibilities with fervour.[25] Yet Henry kept shifting doctrinal beliefs, which appear to have been heavily influenced by national and international politics, and could undergo subtle changes.[26] From this it followed that, although the king had been keen to enforce royal supremacy to obtain his divorce and to marry Anne Boleyn, and in 1536 confirmed the "extynguysshing the auctoryte of the Busshop of Rome" (28 Henry VIII, c. 10), 1536 also marked the execution of Anne Boleyn, and the king's new marriage to the notably conservative Jane Seymour.[27] By 1539, the year in which Cromwell sought to procure the king's marriage to Anne of Cleves, Henry appointed his own bishops (31 Henry VIII, c. 9), and dissolved the abbeys (31 Henry VIII, c. 13), but also issued the Act of Six Articles (31 Hen. VIII c. 14) also known as the "acte abolishing divsity in Opynions," which was notably orthodox, even if his political champions Cranmer and Cromwell were still trying to push forward a more reformist attitude.[28]

The quick succession of changes in law that manifested the king's power over his subjects—in earthly and spiritual matters, as well as the ever-growing list of actions, views and attitudes, that were considered treasonous by law—made the 1530s a particularly poignant and changeable decade within Henry's wider reign. Henry's former friends and allies were not safe if they failed to comply with the king's new legislations, as testified by the executions of Bishop John Fisher and Thomas More in 1535, and the heresy trial of Bishop John Lambert in 1538.[29] But 'ordinary' people could also become entangled in matters of state, such as Elizabeth Barton, also known as the "nun of Kent", who was attainted and hanged for treason in 1534.[30] David Cressy notes that "the years between 1534 and 1540 saw more than 500 investigations,

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[25] Everett, *The Rise of Thomas Cromwell*, 232.

[26] E.W. Ives, "Henry VIII (1491-1547), king of England and Ireland," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/12955. Opposing the idea that Henry VIII's beliefs changed, G.W. Bernard has argued for stable and constant take on matters of belief. He writes that Henry, "consistently rejected what were presented as abuses of the church—monasteries, images, shrines. But he also resolutely refused to have any truck with Lutheran doctrines of justification by faith alone or with sacramentarian views of the mass." G.W. Bernard, "The Making of Religious Policy, 1533-1546: Henry VIII and the Search for the Middle Way," *The Historical Journal* 41, no. 2 (June 1998): 349. Kevin Sharpe critically questions the constancy of Henry's beliefs, reminding readers that "the fact remains that the king supported a vernacular Bible but was swift to try to control its readership; ordered the dissolution of the monasteries and an attack on superstitious rites but insisted on adherence to prescribed ceremonies; and followed the Ten Articles of 1536 that went some way to endorsing tenets of Lutheran theology, not least on justification, with the Six Articles of 1539 that seemed to arrest any move towards reform." Sharpe, *Selling the Tudor Monarchy*, 107.

[27] *Statutes of the Realm*, 3:663.

[28] *Statutes of the Realm*, 3:728, 733, 739.

[29] Richard Rex, "The Religion of Henry VIII," *The Historical Journal* 57, no. 1 (2014): 6.

[30] Diane Watt, "Reconstructing the Word: the Political Prophesies of Elizabeth Barton (1506-1534)," *Renaissance Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (Spring 1997), 136–163.

over 150 trials, and more than 100 executions for treasonous words."[31] Cromwell was to supervise and monitor many of these cases. In 1541 Richard Hilles, who was a Protestant living in London, showed himself critical of the treason legislations:

> it is now no novelty among us to see men slain, hung, quartered, or beheaded; some for trifling expressions, which were explained or interpreted as having been spoken against the king; others for the pope's supremacy; some for one thing, and some for another.[32]

Add to this the fear of foreign invasion as the Catholic countries were joining forces against England, and it is understandable that the years were marked by confusion, paranoia, and neighbours telling on neighbours.

"Erroneous opinions"

It is within this context that Cromwell employed John Bale, a former Carmelite who, once converted to Protestantism, would become one of the most notorious and strident controversialists of the Tudor period. Cromwell had rescued Bale from prison in 1537 where he had been locked up for preaching.[33] That Bale's lectures were overtly political in tone can be seen from the letter written on 8 January 1537 by an alarmed Sir Humfrey Wyngfeld to Charles Brandon, the Duke of Suffolk. The letter concerned Bale, here referred to as "a white friar, late prior of the White Friars in Ipswich, who preaches erroneous opinions to the people about your manor of Thorndon, who daily resort to hear him," and culminated in the advice to take this up with someone from the King's Council as there "are great rumours and quarrels among the people who do not all accept his teaching."[34] Once under Cromwell's protection, Bale and his troupe 'the Lord Privy Seal's Players' performed assertive, reformist drama, and entertained, to borrow Scarisbrick's words, "on village commons and at market squares."[35]

Bale's play *King Johan* was performed at Christmas time in 1538 at the house of Archbishop Cranmer.[36] This play was perceivably more polemical than some of his other work. Why Cranmer would have welcomed such a play as part of his Christmas entertainment can be understood in line with the profusion of moral-allegorical interludes during this decade, as well as with the growing custom of performing interludes during times of festivity or religious

[31] David Cressy, *Dangerous Talk: Scandalous, Seditious, and Treasonable Speech in Pre-Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 50.
[32] Richard Hilles, quoted in Cressy, *Dangerous Talk*, 50.
[33] Seymour Baker House, "Cromwell's Message to the Regulars: The Biblical Trinity of John Bale, 1537," *Renaissance and Reformation* 15, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 124.
[34] *L.P.* 12:1 no. 40 (8 January 1537).
[35] J.J. Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 367.
[36] Thomas Cromwell's Accounts refer to a payment to "Bale and his ffelowes" for "playing before my Lorde." James M. Gibson, ed., *Records of Early English Drama: Kent; Diocese of Canterbury* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 1:151. See also, Peter Happé, "Introduction," in *The Complete Plays of John Bale* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1985), 1:22.

holidays, in which "spiritual renewal and penitential self-examination" were considered appropriate themes for a drama of "moral and spiritual instruction."[37] Also, since Christmas was the time of the year during which lords and patrons would host banquets in their great halls, invite important guests, and enjoy a general atmosphere of revel and festivity, a certain amount of festive licence was granted that one could normally not count on. However, even in the context of calendrical festivity and a fashion for moral interludes, Bale's play was not a 'safe' play to perform in all great hall contexts. On the other hand, since Cranmer's household as that of one of the principal officials and peers of the realm could be seen as a satellite of the royal court, and therefore a performance space less dangerous than the royal palaces—although still not completely without danger—Bale's performing for his patron's ally gave him the opportunity to be more explicit than performance contexts in other places would have allowed.

In *King Johan*, Bale recycled a rather unpopular historical king, and brought him to life on stage. In the thirteenth century, King John had been excommunicated by Pope Innocent III for his opposition to the appointment of Stephen Langton as Archbishop of Canterbury. This fact made the historical monarch an ideal figure in a play about excommunication at the hands of a pope, which was extremely topical in late December 1538, since Henry's long-mooted excommunication from Rome, authorised by Pope Paul III, had only taken place on the seventeenth of this month. Suggesting that history offers a biased account of princes, and hereby opening the way for a new description of the historical monarch, Bale reimagined King John as, Greg Walker's writes, "a thorough zealot in the Protestant mould,"[38] or even as "a Protestant saint."[39] The fictional character King Johan's strongly reformist attitudes are illustrative of the religious ideas that Bale and his sponsors wanted to imprint on his audience members. The assertiveness with which Bale changed history is only a prelude to the rest of the play in which he gives a clear definition of how a king should reign. This representation, although carefully flattering Henry, was sailing close to the wind in trying his tolerance towards the reformist agenda, and was at times pushing beyond what the monarch was likely to be comfortable with. Furthermore, its dictating tone invited only two kind of responses to the play: one could either fiercely agree or disagree with what one saw on stage. As a result, Bale did not protect spectators from the dangers of watching a political play under the preening eyes of prominent players, who in turn had to carefully guard their own skins. So how did he protect himself and his 'ffelows' from the suggestion of treason whilst staying true to his own views and his patrons' agendas?

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[37] Greg Walker, *The Politics of Performance in Early Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 66.

[38] Greg Walker, *Plays of Persuasion: Drama and Politics at the Court of Henry VIII* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 182. Walker is also quoted in Sharpe, although the latter misquotes 'mould' as 'mode.' Sharpe, *Selling the Tudor Monarchy*, 127.

[39] David Bevington, *Tudor Drama and Politics: A Critical Approach to Topical Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 102.

"Naughty communications"

Bale's *King Johan* found itself at the centre of some political discord between spectators who discussed the King and the Pope after having been to see the play. On 11 January 1539 Cranmer wrote to Cromwell reporting an examination that had been carried out the day before, as he had received intelligence regarding "naughty communications" about the "bp. of Rome and Thomas Beckett."[40] According to the statement, an eighteen-year-old called John Alforde "saw an interlude concerning King John at my lord of Canterbury's at Christmas time."[41] This Alforde, when discussing the play in the home of one Thomas Browne of Shawltecliff in Kent on Thursday 2 January, was of the opinion that "it was a pity the bp. Of Rome should reign any longer, for he would do with our King as he did with King John."[42] In line with Bale's reformist views one might well think that Alforde was the ideal spectator, who took from the play exactly what the playwright was trying to get across to his audiences; but his speaking partners did not agree with him. A shipman called Henry Totehill said that "it was pity and naughtily done to put down the Pope and St. Thomas; for the Pope was a good man and St. Thomas saved many ... from hanging."[43] Probably aware that "defending of the authority of the pope, whether by writing, ciphering, printing, preaching or teaching" had become illegal through the 1536 Act Against Papal Authority,[44] Thomas Browne presumably felt uneasy about Totehill's dangerous statement having been made in his presence, and revisited the topic the next day, overtly showing himself as a spectator who had enjoyed a politically acceptable experience of the performance:

> Thos. Brown, of the age of 50 years, deposes that on Friday, 3 Jan., he told Totehill that he had heard, at my lord of Canterbury's, one of the best matters that ever he saw touching King John; that he had heard priests and clerks say that King John "did look like one that had run from burning of a house, but this deponent knew now that it was nothing true, for, as far as he perceived, King John was as noble a prince as ever was in England, and thereby we might perceive that he was the beginner of the putting down of the bishop of Rome, and thereof we might be all glad."[45]

Browne's statement is keen to emphasise that the "priests and clerks" present at the performance had expressed a negative view of the character of King John, but, as he hastens to say, he himself did not agree with these opinions. Indeed, he thought "King Johan" the noblest

[40] *L.P.* 14:1, no. 47 (11 January 1539).
[41] *L.P.* 14:1, no. 47 (11 January 1539).
[42] *L.P.* 14:1, no. 47 (11 January 1539).
[43] *L.P.* 14:1, no. 47 (11 January 1539).
[44] Joseph Block, "Thomas Cromwell's Patronage of Preaching," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 8, no. 1 (April 1977): 38.
[45] *L.P.* 14:1, no. 47 (11 January 1539).

of princes: an opinion which must be based on Bale's performance, as King John did not have a positive reputation prior to this play.[46] It is of course extremely convenient that Browne happened to be standing close to the "priests and clerks" when they uttered their opinions of the historical king, so that his more prudent take on the play could shine by comparison. Totehill allegedly responded again in heated defence of the Pope, "that the bp. of Rome was made Pope by the clergy and consent of all the kings Christian."[47] Cranmer's letter concludes the debate:

> This deponent [Browne] bade him hold his peace, for this communication was naught. Totehill said he was sorry if he had said amiss, for he thought no harm to any man. This was in Alford's presence. Totehill was drunken. Asked why he thought the words naughty, says because he thought he spoke them in the maintenance of the bp. of Rome.[48]

Another eye-witness reports that the shipman had said that "the old law was as good as the new; and that the bp. of Rome was a good man."[49] Browne, again keen to distance himself from such claims, told him that "Totehill had spoken very evil, and when he should be examined he would tell the truth."[50] Cranmer saw Totehill's statement about the Pope in a discussion about a play as a political act against the king's orders: an act of treason. He relays in his letter what kinds of punishments had been given, in his words, to "those who break the King's injunctions," that is, to priests who were caught with similar offences.[51] It demonstrates the serious consequences of such actions, and shows that Cranmer did not make the distinction between a layman and a priest speaking in favour of the Pope. Moreover, although Cranmer's letter does not obfuscate the fact that this "act of treason" was a drunken voice in a conversation between three laymen about an interlude that two of them saw performed at his (Cranmer's) very own house, it appears that the implied justification of the supposed 'criminal act'—that their discussion was about theatre but unfortunately slipped over a fine line into politics and treason, helped by alcoholic consumption—did not sufficiently excuse its occurrence for the authorities. It is also likely that Cranmer acted so proactively because he sought to protect his own reputation, and did not want the word to spread that anything shown at his house was bordering on, or could be interpreted as, treason. After all, Cranmer

[46] Peter Happé, *John Bale* (New York: Prentice Hall International, 1996), 93; David Scott Kastan, "'Holy Wurdes' and 'Slypper Wit': John Bale's *King Johan* and the Poetics of Propaganda," in *Rethinking the Henrician Era: Essays on Early Tudor Texts and Contexts*, ed. Peter C. Herman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 273; Carole Levin, "A Good Prince: King John and Early Tudor Propaganda," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 11, no. 4 (1980): 23.
[47] *L.P.* 14:1, no. 47 (11 January 1539).
[48] *L.P.* 14:1, no. 47 (11 January 1539).
[49] *L.P.* 14:1, no. 47 (11 January 1539).
[50] *L.P.* 14:1, no. 47 (11 January 1539).
[51] *L.P.* 14:1, no. 47 (11 January 1539).

and Cromwell had Henry VIII to answer to, and whatever their or Bale's intentions, were skating on thin ice when sponsoring a play about kings and popes in a political climate in which the representation of kingship was a dangerous thing; when by definition anything disagreeable about such a representation was considered treasonous.

Telling a King How to Rule

Bale and his players are known to have performed a play in the presence of the King at Canterbury earlier in the year, in 1538, called *On the Impostures of Thomas Becket*.[52] This was topical since Becket's shrine had been destroyed just before,[53] demonstrating that Bale was able and willing to produce plays directly reflecting the king's most recent policies. But no such evidence exists for the king's attendance of a performance of *King Johan*, and it is uncertain whether Henry ever watched this play. However, regardless of whether the king would be present at a performance, playmakers wrote their plays with him in mind, as an imaginary spectator who had to be contented. For even if the king did not watch a play himself, word was bound to reach him if a performance was thought to be politically displeasing. For example, on 16 May 1537 the Duke of Suffolk wrote to Cromwell to warn him about "a May game played last May day 'which play was of a king how he should rule his realm'; in which one played husbandry and said many things against gentlemen more than was in the book of the play."[54] The players had clearly overstepped the mark, and had taken on more of an advisory role regarding kingship than Suffolk deemed appropriate. He told Cromwell that in the light of this event he had "ordered the justices of this shire to have regard to light persons, especially at games and plays."[55] As Cromwell's servant, Bale would have been aware of the limitations in place when performing a play about kings and how they should rule their realm. But where some would have avoided the topic altogether in order to 'play safe', Bale sought ways in which he could offer counsel and express views on matters of belief that he cared about, without crossing an invisible line. The tactics he used relied on figures of fun and counsel, flattering representations of kingship, and, perhaps most importantly, an interpretation of treason that would have taken the wind out of the sails of anyone trying to frame Bale himself for such offences.

King Johan, as the protagonist of the play, at times voices opinions about matters of doctrine in a manner more assertive than Henry would have had it. For example, when King Johan advocates the doctrine of *Christus solus*, which was distinctly evangelical: "Tush, yt is

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[52] Greg Walker, *John Heywood: Comedy and Survival in Tudor England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 216–217.

[53] Baker House, "Cromwell's Message to the Regulars," 125; Margaret Aston, *Broken Idols of the English Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 366; Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 109; Walker, *John Heywood*, 437n36.

[54] *L.P.* 12:1, no. 1212 (16 May 1537).

[55] *L.P.* 12:1, no. 1212 (16 May 1537).

madness all to dyspayre in God so sore / And to thynke Christes deth to be unsufficient."[56] But, as the proverb goes: *c'est le ton qui fait la musique*, and the tone of this statement, reinforced by the word "tush"—a dramatic word, tellingly reserved for comic or vicious play characters—shows how subtly Bale merged doctrine and playfulness, making a point whilst hiding behind a theatrical façade.[57] We also see Bale balance out King Johan's hot protestantism at times, by safely aligning the reinvented historical king's actions with Henry VIII's parliamentary acts. For example, King Johan's attitude towards the bishops recalls the Henrician Act in Restraint of Appeals to Rome (1533), which spectators of the play learn when one of the vicious characters in the play complains, "before juges temporall / He [King Johan] conventeth clarkes of cawses crymynall."[58] In other words, members of the clergy will no longer be judged for their crimes in ecclesiastical courts, but will be treated as ordinary subjects. This includes, one of the more vicious characters complains, bishops no longer being able to appear to the "court of Rome":

> *Usurpid Powre*: Before hymselfe also the bysshoppes he doth convent,
> To the derogacyon of ther dygnyte excelent,
> And wyll suffer non to the court of Rome to appele.[59]

King Johan, however, also touches on issues on which Henry was ambiguously positioned. For instance, in a list of "serymonyes and popetly playes" he mentions "halowed belles and purgatorye, / for iwelles, fore relyckes, confessyon and cowrtes of baudrye."[60] Purgatory was a difficult subject for satire: the king appeared to have not supported its wide use, as seen in the Act of Ten Articles voicing "reservations about the doctrine," and the 1543 *King's Book* "prohibit[ing] talk of Purgatory,"[61] but at the same time did act as if he believed in the place himself. As Richard Rex has shown, the intercessory prayers for the soul of Queen Jane Seymour indicate that "Henry had given no reason whatsoever to believe that he was anything other than wholeheartedly committed to traditional beliefs and practices regarding prayer for the dead."[62] King Johan as a character thus represented a political balancing act. In order to make the monarch sufficiently palatable for Henry as a representation of kingship, the character of the Interpreter steps in to sing King Johan's praises.

The Interpreter, although a humble role, would have appealed to a king who was happy to consider his estate as divinely chosen. Careful to seek Henry's favour, the Interpreter refers

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[56] John Bale, *King Johan*, in *The Complete Plays of John Bale: Volume 1*, ed. Peter Happé (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1985), 29–99, ll. 487–488 (hereafter *King Johan*).
[57] Charlotte Steenbrugge, *Staging Vice: A Study of Dramatic Traditions in Medieval and Sixteenth-Century England and the Low Countries* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014), 124: "'Tush' is used by the vices in *Nature*, *Mundus et Infans*, *Magnificence*, and *Three Laws* and almost never by another type of character."
[58] *King Johan*, ll. 913–914.
[59] *King Johan*, ll. 924–926.
[60] *King Johan*, l. 415; ll. 421–422.
[61] Rex, "The Religion of Henry VIII," 24.
[62] Rex, "The Religion of Henry VIII," 25.

to King Johan as "of God a magistrate appoynted."[63] He furthermore describes King Johan in biblical terms, imprinting on the invented persona of this historical character the allegorical ideal of kingship and connecting it to the Old Testament, which was thought to foreshadow the New Testament:

> *Interpretour*: Thys noble kynge Johan as a faythfull Moyses
> Withstode proude Pharao for hys poore Israel,
> Myndynge to brynge it out of the lande of darkenesse.
> But the Egyptyanes ded agaynst hym so rebell
> That hys poore people ded styll in the desart dwell,
> Tyll that duke Josue whych was oure late kynge Henrye
> Clerely brought us in to the lande of mylke and honye.
> As a stronge David at the voyce of verytie
> Great Golye, the Pope, he strake downe with hys slynge
> Restorynge agayne to a Christen lybertie
> Hys lande and people, lyke a most vyctoryouse kynge,
> To hir first bewtye intendynge the churche to brynge
> From ceremonyes dead to the lyvynge wurde of the Lorde.[64]

The imagery of King Johan as a Moses figure and Henry as a "David" slaying the Pope were not Bale's own inventions. John N. King has shown that images in the Coverdale Bible and the Great Bible portrayed Henry as a David figure, making claim to the throne by divine right, and that through the references to Moses' Law prefiguring Christ's Law "an ideal of evangelical kingship" was portrayed, and the king's authority underlined.[65] King notes: "Henry's apologists and those who sought royal patronage created courtly works of art and literature that contained flattering portrayals of the king that imitated his published images."[66] King Johan as Moses could—in Bale's reading—only ever be the forerunner of the current and true champion of England, Henry VIII. For Bale, he therefore stands in relation to Henry as Old Testament figures did to Christ: they are the shadows, forerunners, and prophets of greater truth.

Sacrificing his life for his religious beliefs means that the character of King John dies mid-play. In doing so, he leaves an opening for the allegorical part of Imperial Majesty. The name of this character resonates with the wording in the Act of Appeals, but also the reference to the King of England as an 'emperor' in the 1534 Act of Succession, and importantly, the

[63] *King Johan*, l. 1088.
[64] *King Johan*, ll. 1107–1119.
[65] John N. King, "Henry VIII as David: The King's Image and Reformation Politics," in *Rethinking the Henrician Era: Essays on Early Tudor Texts and Contexts*, ed. Peter C. Herman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 79.
[66] King, "Henry VIII as David," 82.

"Ymperyall Crowne" as cited in the Act of Supremacy. Different readings of Imperial Majesty have been offered; whichever monarch or concept the character represents, one may observe that he is the main authority in the play, working closely together with the "truth"-representing character, Veritas.[67] Thus it is Veritas who urges allegorical characters Nobility, Clergy, and Civil Order to bend the knee for Imperial Majesty, and to "axe pardon" for their "great enormyte" against him.[68] The ceremony in which they kneel allows Imperial Majesty to tower over them, and alongside Veritas to address them in language reminiscent of Henrician law. Firstly, Imperial Majesty thanks Veritas for having done his part "refourmynge these men," using language that carries the religious undertones, guiding the listener to appreciate the sacred value of a subject's loyalty to the king.[69] The words echo the king's right, and that of his heirs and successors, as granted by the Act of Supremacy, to "reforme" any "errours heresies abuses offences contemptes and enormyties" made by their subjects.[70] Secondly, Veritas explains to Imperial Majesty's kneeling subjects—as well as to the audiences watching this speech along with them—that all kings are God-appointed, and may not be judged by mere mortals:

> *Veritas*: For Gods sake obeye lyke as doth yow befall,
> For in hys owne realme a kynge is judge over all
> By Gods appoyntment, and none maye hyme judge agayne
> But the Lorde hymself. In thys the scripture is playne.
> He that condempneth a kynge condempneth God without dought
> He that harmeth a kynge to harme God goeth abought;
> He that a prynce resisteth doth dampne Gods ordynaunce
> And resisteth God in withdrawynge hys affyaunce.
> All subjects offendynge are undre the kynges judgement:
> A kynge is reserved to the Lorde Omnypotent.
> He is a mynyster immedyate undre God,
> Of hys ryghteousnesse to execute the rod.[71]

The language of reform is clear. It is "the scripture" that dictates that kings are "immedyate

[67] Peter Happé has argued that "Imperial Majesty seems to be a version, idealized and deferential, of Henry VIII himself", an opinion very close to Walker's. Happé, *John Bale*, 99; Greg Walker, *Plays of Persuasion*, 210. Alice Hunt, on the other hand, notes that it is "not possible to argue for the performance of *King Johan* at one particular time, or to link Imperial Majesty to a specific monarch," but argues that the function of the character was to "represent a particular concept of monarchy." Alice Hunt, *The Drama of Coronation: Medieval Ceremony in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 100.
[68] *King Johan*, l. 2328.
[69] *King Johan*, l. 2336.
[70] *Statutes of the Realm*, 3:492.
[71] *King Johan*, ll. 2346–2357.

undre God."[72] And thus it is scripture, rather than any earthly power, that suggests that "condempn[ing] a kynge," and as the line continues, harming a king, or resisting a king, are to do the same to God. These acts are therefore framed as not 'only' treasonous, but also heretical. Clergy submissively responds, again evoking the Act of Supremacy:

> *Clergye*: If it be your pleasure we wyll exyle hym [the Pope] cleane,
> That he in thys realme shall nevermore be seane,
> And your grace shall be the supreme head of the Churche.[73]

Clergy, however, does not receive praise for his submission, but on the contrary is given a telling off; Imperial Majesty resents the suggestion that it is for "pleasure of my persone / and not for Gods truthe" to "have suche an enterpryse done."[74] Imperial Majesty's defensive suggestion that he does not take pleasure in the position he has been given, nor in the hostility towards the Pope, but that these matters are imposed on him by "the auctoryte of Gods holy wurde," is reminiscent of the explanation given in the Act of Supremacy for the authority given to Henry VIII and his heirs "to visite represse redresse reforme ordre correct restrayne and amende all suche errours heresies abuses offences contemptes and enormyties what so ever they be."[75] Indeed, the envisaged reforms are justified in the 1534 act as being "the pleasure of Almyghtie God the encrease of vertue yn Chrystis Religion," and "for the [conservacy] of the peace unyte and tranquylyte of this Realme"—thus certainly not for Henry's personal gratification.[76] For Bale to reword the Act of Supremacy and to evoke it frequently in the play was laying it on thickly. He may have stopped at this, but, perhaps aware that he was overdoing it, continues to placate Henry as imagined spectator when Imperial Majesty claims without irony: "It is a clear sygne of true nobilyte / To the wurde of God whan your conscyence doth agree."[77] The word "conscience," so often employed in the context of the King's Great Matter to provide a justification for proclaiming his marriage to Katherine of Aragon void and for his protestations against Rome, had become a larger-than-life concept. At which point does agreeing or complying, even by a serious or 'virtuous' character, become an ambiguously problematic statement?

A clearer equivocation in Imperial Majesty's characterisation can be found in his message that, in order to reduce plurality and to create unity in the realm, all must comply to his rulership:

[72] *King Johan*, l. 2349; l. 2356.
[73] *King Johan*, ll. 2387-2389.
[74] *King Johan*, ll. 2393–2394.
[75] *King Johan*, l. 2397; *Statutes of the Realm*, 3:492.
[76] *Statutes of the Realm*, 3:492.
[77] *King Johan*, ll. 2415–2416.

> *Imperial Majesty*: No man is exempt from thys Gods ordynaunce –
> Bishopp, monke, chanon, priest, cardynall, nor pope.
> All they by Gods lawe to kinges owe their allegeaunce.[78]

The point made about all having to conform to "Gods ordynaunce" relates to the Act of Six Articles in which Henry decreed against both traditional and evangelical expressions of belief.[79] However, Imperial Majesty solely addresses Catholic deviance from the English church and does not refer to the evangelicals whom Henry also included in his legislation. Then, in the very last scene in the play, Imperial Majesty suddenly evokes the "anabaptystes" as if he only just remembered their existence:

> *Imperial Majesty*: That poynt hath in tyme fallen to your memoryes.
> The Anabaptystes, a secte newe rysen of late,
> The scriptures poyseneth with their subtle allegoryes,
> The heades to subdue after a sedicyouse rate.
> The cytie of Mynster was lost through their debate.
> They have here begonne their pestilent sedes to sowe,
> But we trust in God to increace they shall not growe.[80]

It is clear that in *King Johan*, Bale took a step away from being associated with Anabaptists. By having Imperial Majesty dismiss this "secte" as a foreign group, which destabilized the German city of Munster, but which would not, so he suggests, succeed in gaining many followers in England, the threat posed by this group is overtly undermined. "Poyseneth with their subtle allegoryes" is, however, dangerous in its irony, as a remark positioned at the end of an allegorical play.[81] To further complicate this, Imperial Majesty is not the only figure in the play to criticize the Anabaptists; indeed, Sedition the vice also expresses himself negatively about "sacrementaryes / or Anabaptystes."[82] Since spectators throughout the play learn to distrust the vice character, what does this mean for understanding Imperial Majesty? Does it destabilise his authority or does it, equally problematically, lift the vice's?

Bale passed into daring territory as he made the allegorical king Imperial Majesty into a figure that dominates, takes clear reformist action, and overtly expresses Bale's own political opinions, which were pushing the reform further than Henry may have wanted at this point. The combination of flattery, interpretation of Scripture, and assertion of the power of kings as judges may have sufficed to make this play acceptable. But Bale did not take chances. In order

[78] *King Johan*, ll. 2380–2382.
[79] *Statutes of the Realm*, 3:739.
[80] *King Johan*, ll. 2625–2631.
[81] *King Johan*, l. 2627.
[82] *King Johan*, ll. 2531–2532.

to play safe, he both seduced his audiences with humour at the expense of the clergy, and defined 'treason' in one breath.

Burlesquing Catholicism and a Character Named "Treason"

In line with Bale's reformist agenda, the play took every opportunity to question some Catholic practices, and to describe Rome's officials as vain, corrupt and power-hungry. It is important to note that Bale, as the playwright and leader of the troupe of players, is likely to have taken upon himself the role of one of the characters most critical of Catholicism and its various rites and usages: Sedition the 'vice' character, named for the kind of speech or act of a "divisive, contentious, or mutinous" nature, "that was likely to spread discord."[83] In *The Three Laws* (*c.*1530-1538, pr. 1562), Bale probably played both the "Baleus Prolocutor" and "Infidelity the Vice"; it is possible that, correspondingly, *King Johan*'s vice figure could also have been part of a double performance.[84] A doubling scheme overview in Peter Happé's edition of the play suggests that Sedition could easily have doubled with Veritas, the allegorical representation of 'truth', but one may also observe that if a short break for changing costumes were facilitated after the first act, the character playing Sedition could also have taken the role of the Interpreter.[85] This cautious move avoided spectators equating the dramatist to the vice and to his controversial opinions, since the playwright was seen to embody both a comic role that provided hilarity, music, and "verbal games," as well as an authoritative and scholarly voice that directed the audiences in their dramatic (and political) experiences.[86] This is a precaution that Bale's contemporary John Heywood did not take for his performances of *The Play of the Wether* (pr. 1533). Perhaps there was no need for Heywood to double his "Mery Report," a vice character who was naughty but far from malicious, and therefore not as dangerous to be associated with.[87] Sedition as a character, however, was a "bad guy" *par excellence*. Spectators, helped by the vice's various jokes that emphasise his role—such as when he accidentally calls himself "lecherous" instead of "relygyous"—would have understood the irony of the vice, as a

[83] Cressy, *Dangerous Talk*, 42. For more on the character in Bale's play, see: Dermot Cavanagh, "The Paradox of Sedition in John Bale's 'King Johan,'" *English Literary Renaissance* 31, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 171–191. As a general 'rule,' vice characters were usually performed by the principal actor of the group, and James Simpson has observed Bale's tendency to keep the very best roles to himself. James Simpson, "John Bale, *Three Laws*," in *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Drama*, ed. Thomas Betteridge and Greg Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 112.

[84] Peter Happé, "Deceptions: 'The Vice' of the Interludes and Iago," *Theta* 8 (2009): 108; Peter Happé, "Sedition in *King Johan*: Bale's Development of a Vice," *Medieval English Theatre* 3, no. 1 (1981): 3–6.

[85] Happé, *The Complete Plays*, 1:152–153. See also: Dermot Cavanagh, *Language and Politics in the Sixteenth-Century History Play* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 16: "*King Johan* contains an author-figure, 'The interpretour,' who outlines the purpose of Bale's dramaturgy. This speaker, perhaps played by the author himself."

[86] Happé, *John Bale*, 100.

[87] For more on Heywood's *Play of the Wether*, see: Pamela M. King, "John Heywood, *The Play of the Weather*," in *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Drama*, ed. Thomas Betteridge and Greg Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 207–223; Walker, *John Heywood* (2020); David Bevington, "Is John Heywood's Play of the Weather Really About the Weather?," *Renaissance Drama* 7 (1964): 11–19.

character promoting customs and beliefs contrary to the current preferred customs and beliefs.[88] For example, Sedition shows himself guilty of *praemunire*, holding the Pope's authority above that of the king's, and instructing the allegorical character representing the peers of the realm to join him in this belief: "I assoyle the here from the kynges obedyence / By the auctoryte of the Popys magnifycence."[89] In the same part of the dialogue Sedition describes King Johan using the words "cruell tyranny," which, if it had applied to Henry, would have broken the 1534 Treason Act.[90] Audience members would have understood this to have been in line with Sedition's character as a 'vice' as well as his Catholic characteristics, here clearly emphasized by his uttering "*in nomine domini pape, amen*".[91] We also see Sedition cheekily claiming to have been involved in the 1536 Northern Rebellion; when he is condemned to death, he suggests that someone might ask the Pope if he "may be put in the Holye Letanye / With Thomas Beckett."[92] Just to confirm to the audiences that this is a tongue-in-cheek reference to a saint no longer in favour, the character of Imperial Majesty very seriously emphasizes that there is no need to consider Becket as worthy: "Because that he dyed for the Churches wanton lyberte, / That the priestes myght do all kyndes of inyquyte / And be unponnyshed."[93]

The success of Sedition's jokes thus appears to have relied on the unspoken agreement between the vice and the spectators, that the vice continues to present himself as embodying 'Catholic' views and ideas, which can be corrected by the 'morally acceptable' characters or enjoyed by the spectators as 'fun'. The vice, however, becomes a more dangerous character when he deviates from this mechanism and 'exposes' religious customs that Henry VIII actually adhered to. Bale was therefore taking a risk when he, in his role of Sedition, revealed that the practice of auricular confession is a ploy set up by the Pope to gather intelligence across Europe:

> *Sedicyon*: Offend Holy Churche and I warant ye shall yt fele;
> For by confessyon the Holy Father knoweth
> Throw owt all Christendom what to his holynes growyth.[94]

Auricular confession was an acknowledged practice in both the 1536 Act of Ten Articles and the 1539 Act of Six Articles, and Bale's continuous attack on this practice in his play would have pushed well beyond Henry's views on religious belief.[95] At other times, however, Bale

[88] *King Johan*, ll. 304–305.
[89] *King Johan*, ll. 1184–1185.
[90] *King Johan*, l. 1172.
[91] *King Johan*, l. 1188.
[92] *King Johan*, ll. 2515, 2589–2590.
[93] *King Johan*, ll. 2598–2600.
[94] *King Johan*, ll. 271–273.
[95] Happé, *The Complete Plays*, 1:107.

through Sedition's actions appears very much in tune with Henry's personal views, such as when he parodies the veneration of saintly relics:

> *Sedicyon*: Sytt downe on yowre kneys and ye shall have absolucyon
> *A pena et culpa*, with a thowsand dayes of pardon.
> Here ys fyrst a bone of the blyssyd Trynyte,
> A dram of the tord of swete Seynt Barnabe;
> Here ys a feddere of good Seynt Myhelles wyng,
> A toth of Seynt Twyde, a pece of Davyds harpe stryng.[96]

The descriptions of the relics are overtly satirical: how could the Trinity, a spiritual rather than a physical entity, yield any bones to worship, and how would the Church have gone about procuring a saint's turd? 1538 for Henry was a turning point in his attitudes towards the veneration of relics. Early in the year, he had burned a candle in front of the statue of Our Lady of Walsingham, yet during the summer his Second Royal Injunctions ordered the taking down of images, and prohibited "offerings to images and relics or 'kissing or licking of the same'."[97] Peter Happé has suggested that, in conjunction with the enumeration of the relics, "the stage business involved exhibiting the relics to the penitents (and the audience) to be kissed."[98] This would have been amusing for various reasons. Perhaps most obviously, the suggestion of kissing of a holy "tord" is a recognizable variation on the dramatic theme of "*osculare fundamentum*."[99] The handling of the props representing outlandish but harmless souvenirs (indeed, "Davyd's harpe stryng" can hardly be seen as a relic) drew spectators into the realm of the play, making them complicit in behaviour that was on the one hand overtly theatrical, as they were handling a prop, and on the other hand 'sinful', as the Royal Injunction had strictly forbidden such actions in real-life settings. The theatricality of the act signalled the prop-like quality of relics as Bale saw it, and thus made a very current statement about religious doctrine. At the same time, the theatrical mechanism used was notably traditional as it recycled a type of joke from the Catholic morality play genre: the vice characters' comic 'trap', through which they invited audience members to become complicit in a 'sinful' act. This way, the audiences were given a chance to participate in both the protagonist's 'sinning' and, by implication, in their moral growth towards the end of the play.[100] The slipperiness of such drama may lead to various interpretations by spectators: was Bale, through the character of

[96] *King Johan*, ll. 1213–1218.
[97] Ronald C. Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims: Popular Beliefs in Medieval England* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1977), 204–205.
[98] Happé, *The Complete Plays*, 1:124.
[99] Steenbrugge, *Staging Vice*, 102.
[100] See Nadia T. van Pelt, "'Counterfeiting his maister': Shared Folly in *The History of Jacob and Esau*," *Theta* 12 (2016), 134–135. Here I refer to the 'Christmas song' in *Mankind* (*c.*1470) through which the vice characters lure the audience into singing a song using scatological language.

Sedition, mocking Catholic relics, the Royal Injunction, or the spectators themselves as they became the 'butt'—pardon the pun—of a scatological joke. And what did it mean for spectators to comically break the law when interacting with the stage, even in such an obviously ridiculous way? Was Sedition doing justice to his name by causing sedition among the spectators?

Aside from using theatre and theatrical fun as a vehicle for audience members to think about religious practice, Bale also staged the burlesquing of Catholic formal procedure, so as to mock this and draw it into the realms of theatre and entertainment:

> *Dissymulacion*: To wynne the peple I appoynt yche man his place:
> Sum to syng Latyn, and sum to ducke at grace;
> Sum to go mummyng, and sum to beare the crosse;
> Sum to stowpe downeward, as ther heades ware stopt with mosse;
> Sum rede the epystle and gospell at hygh masse;
> Sum syng at the lectorne with long eares lyke an asse.
> The pawment of the Chyrche the aunchent faders tredes,
> Sumtyme with a portas, symtyme with a payre of bedes;
> And this exedyngly drawth peple to devoycyone,
> Specyally whan they do se so good relygeon.[101]

The mock-ceremony in which the vicious characters curse King John is concluded with the Pope's wish for "full autoryty," after which all reply: "With the grace of God we shall *performe* yt, than" [emphasis mine].[102] Indeed, references to playing, performing, and disguising to describe the Catholic characters are given throughout the play. King John as the hero of the tale refers to the clergy as "dysgysyd shavelynges," criticises "serymonyes and popetly playes," and frowns upon "Latyne mummers."[103] Similarly, when the vice characters offer descriptions of themselves that betray an anti-Catholic bias, such as Sedition, masquerading or concealing forms an important part of their claims: "Sumtyme I can playe the whyght monke, symtyme the fryer / The purgatory prist and every mans wyffe desyer."[104] Play-pretending here goes hand in hand with the changing of costume, as he will soon after "chaunge myn apparell unto a bysshoppe."[105] And similarly hypocrisy and underhand behaviour are to be seen as theatrical, such as Dissimulation's claim that "Thowgh we playe the knavys we must shew a good pretence."[106] Dissimulation also evokes the idea of deceit when he reveals himself to be able to

[101] *King Johan*, ll. 698–707.
[102] *King Johan*, l. 1051–1052.
[103] *King Johan*, l. 429; l. 415; l. 426.
[104] *King Johan*, ll. 203–204.
[105] *King Johan*, ll. 296–297.
[106] *King Johan*, l. 688.

"play the suttle foxe."[107] This is not so different from when Ambitio in Bale's *Three Laws* asks a character called Infidelitas what he thinks of his mitre, and the latter answers: "The mouth of a wolfe, and that shall I proue by & by / If thou s*t*oupe downward / Lo, se how y*e* wolfe doth ga*p*e?"[108] Paul Whitfield White has noted how the Vice character makes Ambitio bend over so that his mitre does indeed resemble the mouth of a wolf gaping at the audience, which must have been both comic and memorably disturbing for its spectators.[109] Meanwhile, it made a theatrical prop out of a Catholic ritual item, and would have won spectators over through laughter.

Along the same lines, the act of treason in Bale's play is something that is performed, equating the burlesqued Catholic rituals and the act of treason in the minds of the spectators. The act is exemplified by a character conveniently named Treason, who is the most explicit and therefore also most dangerous character in the play, but notably also a very theatrical figure; he is identified to the audience as a member of the Catholic clergy when King Johan asks him how being a priest and a traitor agree with each other, to which he responds "Yes, yes, wele ynough, underneath *Benedicite*. / Myself hath played it, and therfor I knowe it the better."[110] King Johan and the allegorical character England question the traitor about his conduct, and Treason lists a number of traditions and customs of the Catholic Church, emphasising, among other things, their keenness for money and for using Latin as a way to obfuscate their message to the people.[111] When King Johan critically asks Treason why he had "sought no reformacyon,"[112] Treason responds:

> It is the lyvynge of our whole congregacyon.
> If supersticyons and ceremonyes from us fall,
> Farwele monke and chanon, priest, fryer, byshopp and all.
> Our conveyaunce is suche that we have both moneye and ware.[113]

He thus gives what sounds like an insider's perspective on the Catholic clergy's lifestyle, but from an overtly reformist perspective. England and King Johan, after hearing Treason, pass a verdict that "suche treason as he shall sure hange fore."[114] When King Johan points out that one cannot hang a priest, England reasons that "I accompt hym no priest that worke such

[107] *King Johan*, l. 714.
[108] John Bale, *A Nevve Comedy or Enterlude, Concernyng Thre Lawes of Nature, Moises, and Christe, Corrupted by the Sodomytes, Pharysies, and Papistes: Compyled by Iohn Bale: and nowe newly imprynted*. (London, 1562; *STC* 1288), sig. F4r.
[109] Paul Whitfield White, "The Bible as Play in Reformation England," in *The Cambridge History of British Theatre*, ed. Jane Milling and Peter Thomson (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 91.
[110] *King Johan*, l. 1811–1813.
[111] *King Johan*, l. 1841.
[112] *King Johan*, l. 1843.
[113] *King Johan*, ll. 1844–1847.
[114] *King Johan*, l. 1862.

haynouse treason."[115] The suggestion offered is that, from an 'English' perspective, Catholic priests are not to be recognised as priests, and that treason against the king is treason against God, thus underlining once again the idea echoing throughout the play: that kings are divinely appointed. Bale's dramatically defining treason as a protection mechanism may have saved him from overstepping the king's boundaries by taking the reformist message further than would have been politically sensible at the moment of performance. At the same time, when he adjusted the tone of his argument to sound more like a cleric speaking from the pulpit than a costumed play-actor in a great hall, Bale probably forgot that Henry did not like being preached at any more than he liked being counselled.

Conclusion

Through flattery and endorsements of Henry VIII's more reform-leaning laws, acts and measures, and by emphasising the behaviour of priests as treasonous acts against God and king, Bale sought to remind Henry that he was on his side, and tried to induce him to further the reformist cause. With *King Johan* the dramatist took careful measures to avoid being accused of treason himself, but still found himself doing something that was only just acceptable: in unmistakable terms, he told his king how to rule. Cromwell may have suspected the danger of banking on a solely reformist perspective in the entertainment that he offered under his patronage. On 11 February 1539—very shortly after the performance of *King Johan*—Cromwell paid John Heywood, a conservative Catholic in favour of religious moderation, for a performance of a *Masque of King Arthur's Knights* at his own house.[116] A repeat performance at court, paid for by Cromwell, is likely to have occurred eleven days later, as the accounts show that Cromwell financially compensated "the bargemen that carried Heywood's maske to the court and home again."[117] Although Bale in his *King Johan* did not compromise the strength of his political argument, he does seem to have been extremely aware of the dangers of the Treason Act, and of the king's fluctuating religious views and political favours, as demonstrated by his swift departure for the Continent on Cromwell's arrest.[118] Cranmer, interestingly, appears to have been entirely convinced by Bale's re-imagination of the historical King John performed at his house; in his letter to Henry written one day after Cromwell's arrest, he "Expresses his amazement and grief that he should be a traitor who was so advanced by the King and cared for no man's displeasure to serve him."[119] Curiously, Cranmer continues: "and was so vigilant to detect treason that King John, Henry II, and Richard II, had

[115] *King Johan*, l. 1881.
[116] Richard Axton and Peter Happé, "Life and Works," in *The Plays of John Heywood* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1991), 7.
[117] Axton and Happé, "Life and Works," 7.
[118] Pineas notes that Bale "fled to Germany, where he continued his polemical output, which was smuggled into England and secretly distributed." Rainer Pineas, "Polemical Use of the Scriptures in the Plays of John Bale," *Dutch Review of Church History* 66, no. 2 (1986): 180n1.
[119] *L.P.* 15, no. 770.

they had such a councillor, would never have been so overthrown as they were."[120]

[120] *L.P.* 15, no. 770.