Comparative Caricatures

in *King John* and *Troublesome Raigne*

Jacob Hughes

A proverbial "the chicken or the egg" question pervades the majority of scholarly discussion concerning *The Troublesome Raigne of John, King of England*—published anonymously in 1591, reprinted as by "W.Sh." in 1611—and its very close Shakespearean cousin, the canonical *King John*. Beatrice Groves effectively summarizes the general ambiguity: "One of the playwrights, as he writes his play, is remembering an earlier play; one of them is not."[1] Brian Boyd notes, "Everyone concurs that *The Troublesome Raigne* is intimately related to and manifestly inferior to *King John*, but there agreement ends."[2] Thus, the gist of the pervading arguments suggests that one play spawned the other—one author is essentially plagiarizing nearly every aspect of the other play, either through Shakespeare's use of memory as Groves suggests[3] or "access to an outline of Shakespeare's scenes but not to the details of his language" as postulated by Boyd.[4] But scholars on both sides of the fence on this issue seem to be ignoring another viable possibility—both plays were written by the same author.

Ramon Jiménez suggests that "In view of the extraordinary similarities of structure, plot, characters, language, and dramatic detail in the two plays, it is not hard to conclude that they were written by the same person—William Shakespeare."[5] Both productions are nearly identical in their procession of scenes, the lists of *dramatis personae* are virtually the same, and the authors both seem to be following and manipulating the Holinshed source in analogous ways.[6] To Boyd the author of *Troublesome Raigne* merely is parroting Shakespeare's use of Holinshed, and indeed the rest of the source material in general.[7] Groves, on the other hand, points out that Shakespeare either shortens or omits entire conversations altogether from *Troublesome Raigne*, and suggests that if *King John* had been the derivative play, then "it would seem frankly bizarre to choose to dedicate forty-five lines" to a joke that

Shakespeare spends only a line or two on, i.e., the interchanges between the Bastard and Austria in Act III of both plays (which will be discussed in greater detail below): "No one with the slightest ounce of theatrical sense would change a witty, snappy comeback, to an intricate and less funny version of the same joke."[8]

Perhaps more telling is the means by which the author changes, exchanges, and modifies his caricatures, especially those embodied in John and the Bastard. For as closely as the plays are related in plot, both the Bastard and John inhabit starkly differing character roles that are almost mutually exclusive with their counterparts in the other play. John, for example, is a far less wormy king in *Troublesome Raigne* than in *King John*. Although he is still weak, John puts up a stronger front against Pandulph, the papal legate:

> Philip, though thou and all the Princes of Christendome
> suffer themselves to be abusde by a Prelates slaverie, my
> minde is not of such base temper. If the Pope will bee
> King in England, let him winne it with the sword, I know
> no other title he can alleage to mine inheritance.
> (*TR* 3.85-89)[9]

In *King John* he responds in a very similar fashion, but focuses primarily on commodity rather than force of arms:

> Thou you and all the kings of Christendom
> Are led so grossly by this meddling priest,
> Dreading the curse that money may buy out,
> And by the merit of vild gold, dross, dust,
> Purchase corrupted pardon of a man
> Who in that sale sells pardon from himself;
> Though you, and all the rest so grossly led,
> This juggling witchcraft with revenue cherish,
> Yet I alone, alone do me oppose
> Against the Pope, and count his friends my foes.
> (3.1.163-71)[10]

On first glance it may appear as if John in *King John* is more eloquently saying the same as his counterpart in *Troublesome Raigne*, yet a closer examination of the text reveals that in *King John* he, in hypocritical fashion, rails against commodity and being alone in this travail. Simply, it sounds like John is whining. John in *Troublesome Raigne* refers only to martial defiance against the Pope: "let Innocent *try* to dislodge me!"

John's greater strength manifests itself in a variety of other ways in *Troublesome Raigne*. After Philip asks John what dowry he will receive for Blanch, John responds, "First Philip knows her dowrie out of Spaine / To be so great as may content a King: / But more to mend and amplifie the same, / I give in money thirtie

thousand markes" (*TR* 2.404-407). It is only after some haggling on the part of Philip and Elinor's intervention that John reluctantly relinquishes his historical French territories. However, in *King John*, John gives the farm away at the outset:

> Then do I give Volquesson, Touraine, Maine,
> Poitiers, and Anjou, these five provinces,
> With her to thee, and this addition more,
> Full thirty thousand marks of English coin.
> (2.1.527-532)

No mention is made of the Spanish provinces, but those can be assumed and are not what is at moral hand here. The Bastard laments, "Mad world, mad kings, mad composition! / John, to stop Arthur's title in the whole, / Hath willingly departed with a part" (2.1.561-563). John is reprehensible in that he is dumping the lands his older brother fought so hard to keep.

In several key moments in *Troublesome Raigne*, the Bastard comes off as far less able than John, and morally questionable in his own right. For instance, during the dowry scene, the Bastard complains of losing out to the Dauphin:

> 'Swounds Madam, take an English Gentleman:
> Slave as I was, I thought to have moovde the match.—
> Grandame you made me halfe a promise once,
> That Lady Blanch should bring me wealth inough,
> And make me heire of store of English land.
> (*TR* 2.371-375)

Elinor tells the Bastard to shut up; she will find him another wife. The Bastard responds with a snippy remark about cuckolding the Dauphin, but then lets it go: "If Lewes get her, well, I say no more: / But let the frolicke Frenchman take no scorne, / If Philip front him with an English horne" (*TR* 2.378-380). The most disturbing factor in the Bastard's compliance is that he seems to be a willing participant in the aristocratic culture of commodity, the very thing that the *King John* Bastard rails against:

> Mad world, mad kings, mad composition!
> John, to stop Arthur's title in the whole,
> Hath willingly departed with a part,
> And France, whose armor conscience buckled on,
> Whom zeal and charity brought to the field
> As God's own soldier, rounded in the ear
> With that same purpose-changer, that sly devil,
> That broker that still breaks the pate of faith,
> That daily break-vow, he that wins of all,
> Of kings, of beggars, old men, young men, maids,

Who having no external thing to lose
But the word "maid," cheats the poor maid of that,
That smooth-fac'd gentleman, tickling commodity,
Commodity, the bias of the world—
The world, who of itself is peized well,
Made to run even upon even ground,
Till this advantage, this vile-drawing bias,
This sway of motion, this commodity,
Makes it take head from all indifferency,
From all direction, purpose, course, intent—
And this same bias, this commodity,
This bawd, this broker, this all-changing word,
Clapp'd on the outward eye of fickle France,
Hath drawn him from his own determin'd aid,
From a resolv'd and honorable war
To a most base and vile-concluded peace.
And why I rail on this commodity?
But for because he hath not woo'd me yet:
Not that I have the power to clutch my hand
When his fair angels would salute my palm,
But for my hand, as unattempted yet,
Like a poor beggar, raileth on the rich.
Well, whiles I am a beggar I will rail,
And say there is no sin but to be rich;
And being rich, my virtue then shall be
To say there is no vice but beggary.
Since kings break faith upon commodity,
Gain, be my lord, for I will worship thee.
(2.1.561-598)

John, on the other hand, seems to be making the deal in order to effect peace, and recognizes that Richard fought hard for those lands: "Mother: / What shall I doo? my brother got these lands / With much effusion of our English bloud: / And shall I give it all away at once?" (*TR* 2.415-417). Elinor says that he should give up the territories in order to save him any further trouble or challenges to his title. The Bastard complains of a loss of personal wealth while the King makes a sacrifice, albeit under sleazy pretences. Unlike his counterpart in *Troublesome Raigne*, the Bastard of *King John* can objectively and without hypocrisy provide commentary on the self-interest of kings. The *Troublesome Raigne* Bastard is a willing participant in the culture of commodity, and only gets snippy when he does not get his.

Although King John in *King John* is a clever fellow, he rarely expresses the same level of wit as his bastard nephew. The *Troublesome Raigne* John, on the other hand, gets in his comedic licks, unlike his counterpart who seems to be a spoilsport. In *King John* Constance rails against Austria for being a coward in the face of the

new Dauphin-Blanch deal: "Thou wear a lion's hide! Doff it for shame, / And hang a calve's skin on those recreant limbs" (3.1.128-129). Austria blusters, "O, that a man should speak those words to me!" (130). The Bastard obliges: "And hang a calve's-skin on those recreant limbs" (131). The comedic moment continues until John ruins the atmosphere: "We like not this, thou dost forget thyself" (133). John from *Troublesome Raigne*, however, inhabits the opposite role. The Bastard challenges Austria to a duel, but is promptly rejected:

> Base Bastard, misbegotten of a King.
> To interrupt these holy nuptial rytes
> With brawles and tumults to a Dukes disgrace:
> Let it suffice, I scorne to joyne in fight,
> With one so farre unequall to my selfe.
> (*TR* 3.31-35)

Essentially, Austria declaims that since the Bastard is not a legitimate son of Richard I, then his peerage is in question. Austria's honor is intact if he refuses the challenge of someone unequal to his station. John, however, sets a trap:

> Philip, we cannot force the Duke to fight,
> Being a subject unto neither Realme:
> But tell me Austria, if an English Duke
> Should dare thee thus, wouldst thou accept the challenge?
> (*TR* 3.38-41)

Naturally, Austria accepts, and then John promptly knights the Bastard as Duke of Normandy—a symbolically significant title, as William the Conqueror held it, and so did subsequent English kings.[11] Groves notes that similar plot devices are employed in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Rumpelstiltskin*—a tribute to popular structures employed in folklore on the part of the author.[12] Despite the questionable title, especially one so close to that of the English kings, John is driving the show in *Troublesome Raigne*. If John and the Bastard's places were switched in *King John*, one half expects that the Bastard would have made a similar call, save for the granting of Normandy. *Troublesome Raigne*'s Bastard is certainly noble, but not as wise as his counterpart.

The Bastard's caricature in *Troublesome Raigne* is more in keeping with that of Richard I. Elinor remarks, after the humiliation of Austria and the Bastard's subsequent proclamation that "I cannot live unless his life be mine" (*TR* 3.58), that "[The Bastard's] forwardness this day hath joyd my soule, / And made me think my Richard lives in thee" (*TR* 3.59-60). Though *King John*'s Bastard is forward, and pleases Elinor similarly, he is only ever physically likened unto Richard. It is significant that he *would* have been king if legitimacy were not an issue; the Bastard would have made a better king in *King John*, regardless of how close he was in character to Richard. Rather, the inherent nobility of *King John*'s Bastard

is downplayed in favor of his ability. Gieskes points out that he has chosen his noble identity[13]; after all, John did rule in his favor regarding the Faulconbridge inheritance. The Bastard could have easily resumed his tenure at the Faulconbridge estate. On the other hand, the *Troublesome Raigne* Bastard is inherently noble, "naturalized" in his position.[14]

The question of noble identity pervades both of the Bastard's caricatures. Gieskes notes, "Philip Faulconbridge claims royal ancestry (after direct supernatural prompting) and proceeds to behave as a person of noble descent."[15] It is significant that the *Troublesome Raigne* Bastard only capitulates to his nobility after direct prompting from John, in yet another scene depicting the King as more able than Faulconbridge. After being asked by Essex (at the King's behest) three times who his father is, the Bastard falls into a trance, and upon awakening is questioned by John himself. The Bastard responds:

> Please it your Majestie, Sir Robert—
> Philip, that Fauconbridge cleaves to thy jawes:
> It will not out, I cannot for my life
> Say I am Sonne unto a Fauconbridge
> Let land and living goe, tis honors fire
> That makes me sweare King Richard was my Sire.
> Base to a King addes title of more State,
> Than Knights begotten, though legittimate.—
> Please it your Grace, I am King Richards Sonne.
> (*TR* 1.273-281)

The Bastard claims that honor is his primary motivating factor, though he had to fall into a trance before his honor vaunted forth. Additionally, he seems to justify his loss of landed privilege through the improvement of his "state." The Bastard's rumination may initially seem to indicate that he has decided, amidst the heated discussion among his brother, mother, and the nobles, that being the bastard son of a king is more profitable: "inherent nobility" seems in this case to be a far cry from the Bastard's actual motivations. However, Groves suggests that folkloric tradition drives the author's use of convention in *Troublesome Raigne*: primogeniture, the anointment of rulers, and rigid social hierarchy are all prevalent conventional factors.[16]

What remains unclear, however, is why the Bastard justifies his choice through commodity, and just how rigidly the author is adhering to folkloric tradition. It is true that the Bastard behaves like a member of the aristocracy throughout the duration of *Troublesome Raigne*, and this seems to set him completely apart from the Bastard in *King John*, both in his initial unwillingness to give up his estate and his rigidly honorific behavior. However, the latter Bastard in *King John* is also initially opposed to giving up his estate, stating that if his brother can prove his illegitimacy, then "a pops me out / At least from fair five hundred pound a year. / Heaven guard my mother's honor, and my land!" (1.1.67-70). In addition, once the Bastard accepts

his position as a Plantagenet, he resolves to adjust to this "worshipful society" and means "to learn; / For it shall strew the footsteps of my rising" (1.1.205, 215-216). Here the Bastard does not seem so much like an aspiring employee as Gieskes and Groves would have it, but rather an honorable, if intelligent and shrewd, individual in a play filled with backbiting nobles. Thus, the *Troublesome Raigne*'s Bastard seems prototypical of his counterpart in *King John*. The former Bastard's motivations are not as simplistically linked to honor as they would initially seem, and the latter Bastard is not merely a grasping social climber.

Despite the moderation of the supposed starkly differing caricatures of the Bastard between *King John* and *Troublesome Raigne*, John and the Bastard have an inverse power relationship in both plays. Groves points out, "In Shakespeare's play King John is not the undisputed hero (as he had been in *The Troublesome Raigne*) and the Bastard's importance rises to compensate for the relative demotion of the King."[17] The dramatic purpose of John and the Bastard is generally the same in both plays, but *King John* rearranges caricatures in more complex ways. For instance, while John opposes papal authority he whimpers at being alone in doing so, and shows no remorse for eventually capitulating as he does in *Troublesome Raigne*, who laments "Shame be my share for yielding to the Priest" (*TR* 12.76). The Bastard in *Troublesome Raigne* is not nearly the pun-master that he is in *King John*, save for his quip about cuckolding the Dauphin, and seems to rely on honor rather than wit or any combination thereof, and yet is motivated by commodity. The complex rearranging and balancing of the primary two character roles strongly suggests that *Troublesome Raigne* was written first, as it is generally wordier than *King John* and contains additional character roles. It is more logical to omit rather than to add.[18]

Shakespeare's careful attention to the inverse character balance between the Bastard and John in *King John* suggests that the Bard was *intimately* familiar with *Troublesome Raigne*. This fact necessitates that Shakespeare saw the performance and had an eidetic memory, or that he possessed a copy of the play. Additionally, Shakespeare's motivation for composing *King John* must be ascertained—other than its vigorous anti-papal elements and topical relationship with Elizabeth's relationship with the Vatican, the historical King John was very weak and generally accepted as a vastly inferior ruler to his brother. *King John* also is also set in a far earlier period than his other history plays, begging the reason for the author's temporal departure. Other English kings, notably John's father Henry II, had run-ins with the clerical authority, and proved to be stronger rulers.[19] It seems that if Shakespeare was motivated by flag-waving alone, he would have picked a better monarch. Rather, he stunts the monarch in comparison to the bastard. Goddard provides especially helpful insight: "The plan of *King John* is simplicity itself. It is centered around a devastating contrast."[20] Goddard names the Bastard "as upright, downright, forthright a hero as [Shakespeare] ever depicted."[21] Whereas *Troublesome Raigne* only implies the Bastard's superior claim to the throne through his relationship to Richard, and by John granting him Normandy, in *King John* he is superior in nearly every way to John. Goddard suggests that Shakespeare intends irony in the title by naming John "king" — "[The Bastard's] title is the truth."[22] This play concerns "the

everlasting conflict between Truth and Commodity."[23]

Shakespeare tweaks the characters of John and the Bastard from *Troublesome Raigne* in order to unify the theme of his play. In each play both characters exert influence in inverse proportion to one another, though their contrast is not as marked in *Troublesome Raigne* as it is in *King John*. The author deliberately switched roles and made key omissions in order to highlight their disparity. John no longer participates in comedy and fails to make any strong decisions save for his emasculated posturing against Pandulph, and the Bastard is not as beholden to Elinor's will or commodity, taking control of his own fate and becoming the source of comedy for the play. Thus, Shakespeare has transformed a moderately palatable king into a sniveling creep and a noble but dense Bastard into a paragon of honor and wit. The dramatic effect of *Troublesome Raigne* is not so much abandoned as it is heightened.

The authorial motivations for the composition of *Troublesome Raigne* and *King John* are likely differing, yet inextricably related. Sider initially argues that "*Raigne* is just not like Shakespeare,"[24] yet concedes that it may reflect his poetic development in the late 1580s. Sider's assertion is problematic: the "Queenes Maiesties Players," the troupe responsible for *Troublesome Raigne's* production, formed in 1583 and fell into decline by 1588 after the death of Richard Tarleton, along with competition from the Admiral's Men and other personnel problems.[25] Thus, *Troublesome Raigne* most likely was composed no later than 1588 and perhaps as early as 1583.

The Queen's Men were formed under auspices that reveal some potentially interesting Shake-speare connections. Francis Walsingham, Elizabeth's spymaster, was responsible for the company's inception in 1583, as Lord Chamberlain Sussex, to whom the duties would have "naturally fallen," was taken ill.[26] Walsingham may seem like an odd choice: he was interested primarily in national security and the preservation of Elizabeth's police state. Far from concerned with an artistic agenda, Walsingham shrewdly recognized the value of the public theater, and sought to employ it in order to bolster fervor against Catholicism and solidify national unity.[27] *King Leir, The Famous Victories of Henry V, The True Tragedy of Richard III*, and *The Troublesome Raigne of John* were all major productions undertaken by the company,[28] a veritable laundry list of plays that would be used, as orthodox critics would put it, as sources for some of Shakespeare's key tragedies and histories. Anderson argues that "*source* is too timid a word" to describe the bard's derivations—"first draft" seems more appropriate.[29]

The anonymity of *Troublesome Raigne*'s author, among the other Shakespeare "sources" performed by the Queen's Men, is conspicuous. Walsingham certainly was not penning the plays, as he had numerous other affairs of state to attend to and seems to have no record of artistic inclination. Rather, the playwright was in the employ of the government, but no record exists of payments to any person for the specific task of writing the works. However, Anderson points to correspondences throughout a six-day period in 1586 between Lord Burghley, Walsingham, and Edward de Vere, all alluding to an "unnamed proposal."[30] Days later, Elizabeth, with

the seal of the Privy Council, granted an annuity of 1000 pounds per year to de Vere —an incredible amount of money to say the least, especially considering that it lasted the course of the Earl's life, even after James I ascended.[31] No stipulation was made as to the purpose of the annuity. Anderson finds it suspicious that the majority of the Shakespeare "source" plays were seemingly composed in conjunction with de Vere's inexplicable turn of good fortune with the Queen, coinciding with Walsingham's supervision of the Queen's Men.

Initially, it may seem that Oxford's annuity concerned a different matter: three years had passed between the inception of the Queen's Men and the granting of the annuity. However, it must be noted that during its developmental stages, Walsingham suggested to Elizabeth that top actors should be siphoned off from other groups and added to the Queen's Men. Oxford, among others including Leicester, lost top talent to Walsingham's company.[32] Leicester's and Oxford's companies actively toured not only the court but London and surrounding areas as well; tours became so frequent as even to incur Puritan backlash due to increased levels of "rowdyism."[33] Thus, theater at the time was not only booming, but Oxford's company was apparently quite popular. By 1586, de Vere's fortunes had been in decline, and it has been argued that the Queen's annuity was granted to improve his estate. However, 1000 pounds per year is a tremendous amount of money, and Walsingham's involvement further complicates matters. Though the connections are circumstantial, it is not unreasonable to consider Oxford as a viable candidate for author of the Shake-speare "sources" performed by Walsingham's propaganda troupe. With his former top actors already in the mix, financial woes to consider, and a reputation to rebuild, Oxford would have been an auspicious commission on the part of the spymaster.

The authorial problem of connecting *Troublesome Raigne* to *King John* is somewhat disentangled by an Oxfordian reading of the texts. Groves already has pointed out that *Troublesome Raigne* invokes numerous popular folk elements.[34] If Oxford was composing these plays as part of a propaganda machine, it makes sense that he would incorporate popular folk elements and tropes, giving his audience several ways to relate to the events depicted in the production. However, like *King John*, *Troublesome Raigne* is ever aware of primogeniture, land disbursement, politically motivated marriage arrangements, and commodity—all of which concerns are reflective of a privileged worldview. From this perspective, de Vere's revision of *Troublesome Raigne* yielded the canonical *King John*, a play no longer bogged down by so many heavy-handed folkloric elements, and with caricatures that reflect not only noble ambivalence and weakness, but constancy through honor and a rejection—by the Bastard at least—of the mercantile machine's "commodity": the usurper of anointed privilege. Shakespeare had begun turning his works inward toward his own personal life and court politics, focusing now on those darker elements he treated with better favor in earlier efforts.

Regardless of the authorship issue, the composition of *King John* in

relation to *Troublesome Raigne* is especially reflected in its complex rearranging of the original's caricatures. Shakespeare transforms two moderately laudable characters into a simpering and weak king and a valiant and witty Bastard. Though his motivations for doing so remain a mystery (one especially wonders why he would have bothered rearranging and adapting a somewhat lackluster production), Shakespeare's mastery is reflected in rearrangement and omission, a reprioritization of the play's loci. Otherwise, we are left to assume that *Troublesome Raigne* was composed by someone with not only an eidetic memory, but also a flair for ponderous jokes rooted in folklore, with a copy of Holinshed at hand. The circumstantial case for Oxford's authorship requires far fewer leaps in logic.

Endnotes

[1] Beatrice Groves, "Memory, Composition, and the Relationship of *King John* to *The Troublesome Raigne of King John*," *Comparative Drama* 38.2 (2004), 277.
[2] Brian Boyd, "*King John* and *The Troublesome Raigne*: Sources, Structure, Sequence," *Philological Quarterly* 74.1 (1995), 37.
[3] Groves, 277.
[4] Boyd, 37.
[5] Ramon Jiménez, "Who Was the Author of Five Plays that Shakespeare Rewrote as His Own?" *Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter* 44.1 (2008), 17.
[6] Jiménez, 16.
[7] Boyd, 39.
[8] Groves, 287.
[9] All quotations of the anonymous play are from *The Troublesome Raigne of John, King of England*, ed. J.W. Sider (New York: Garland, 1979).
[10] All quotations of the canonical play are from *The Life and Death of King John* in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1997), 809-840.
[11] Brian Tierney, *Western Europe in the Middle Ages: 300-1475*, 6th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1999), 196-197.
[12] Groves, 284.
[13] Edward Gieskes, "'He is but a Bastard to the time': Status and Service in *The Troublesome Raigne of John* and Shakespeare's *King John*," *ELH* 65.4 (1998),780.
[14] Gieskes, 794.
[15] Gieskes, 779.
[16] Groves, 285.
[17] Groves, 285.
[18] Groves, 287.
[19] Tierney, 327.
[20] Harold C. Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare, Volume 1* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 141.
[21] Goddard, 141.
[22] Goddard, 141.
[23] Goddard, 147.
[24] J.W. Sider, "Introduction" in *The Troublesome Raigne of John, King of England* (New York: Garland, 1979), lii.
[25] E.K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage, Volume 2* (London: Oxford University Press,

1923), 104, 109.

[26] Chambers, 104.

[27] Mark Anderson, *Shakespeare By Another Name* (New York: Gotham Books/Penguin, 2005), 207.

[28] Anderson, 114.

[29] Anderson, 208.

[30] Anderson, 209.

[31] Anderson, 210.

[32] Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 22.

[33] Gurr, 23.

[34] Groves, 285.