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The Paradox of Sedition in John Bale’s *King Johan*

In John Bale’s *King Johan* (c. 1538–63) we observe, according to Ivo Kamps, ‘the slow and extraordinary birth of historiography in literature’. This evaluation is generous, but not untypical of the critical attention the play has commanded. It is even more suggestive for this study, that Bale’s resort to historical material is compelled by his interest in the threat of sedition. Yet, conceiving of the play as a foundational document — that is, as exemplifying how the national past could be made available for theatre — has also involved emphasizing its ideological inflexibility. Irving Ribner confirmed the play’s status as a progenitor of later historical theatre by stressing three crucial features of its composition: first, Bale’s drama is a formative expression of English national consciousness; second, it demonstrates how ‘to reinterpret history in the light of doctrine’; and, finally, it exemplifies how historical events can be used to illuminate ‘a political problem of the present’. Hence, *King Johan* helps to elucidate the key motive that informs subsequent historical drama: the homiletic potential of the past.

In many respects, such a reading is entirely satisfying. Conveniently, *King Johan* contains an author-figure, ‘The interpretour’, who outlines the purpose of Bale’s dramaturgy. This speaker, perhaps played by the author himself, concludes the play’s first part by reiterating the admonitory lesson its first Tudor audience was to imbibe: catholic villainy destroyed King John’s attempt to reform the church and disposed of his right to independent jurisdiction. For Ivo Kamps, such moments reveal Bale’s blatantly didactic use of historical material: ‘hence [he] strives to conceal the ideological strategies which affect to present the reader with “history” itself’ (p. 65). It is only much later in the period – chiefly, for Kamps, in the more sceptical and sophisticated ambience of Stuart theatre – that dramatists can explore the
self-interested nature of historical assertions rather than simply endorsing propaganda.

Yet, *King Johan*’s status as a foundational text needs both revision and expansion. Here, a fuller awareness of the play’s protracted composition is illuminating, especially in terms of understanding how the passage of time exerted pressure upon the dramatist’s reformation ideals. This experience engendered in Bale a complex form of historical awareness and this is expressed most fully through his concern with disorderly speech. Such insight derives from his religious principles but it is not, therefore, unreflective. In short, the figure of ‘Sedicyon’ becomes less easy to evaluate as *King Johan* progresses. The play embodies the dramatist’s bitter understanding that the category of sedition can be used to incriminate godly speech. Consequently, the form of *King Johan* becomes more conflicted and less dogmatic in its theatrical effect. It is in this respect that Judith Butler’s formulation of the ‘open temporality’ of the speech act illuminates the play’s treatment of injurious language: the play is alert to the mutability that attends the status of such expression. Through the medium of historical drama, Bale begins to explore the alarming utility of sedition as an instrumental category for worldly power. Hence, the play’s sensitivity to present as well as past historical experience involves it in a critical account of how categories of speech regulate political (as much as spiritual) life. It is in this sense, as well, that the play is foundational.

To question the dogmatism of *King Johan* appears absurd, however, in the light of its author’s reputation for ferocious Reformation polemic: ‘At times,’ W. T. Davies remarks cruelly, ‘John Bale seems to be not so much writing as barking in print.’ Yet, it is worth enquiring a little more carefully into what, precisely, is implied by Bale’s presentation of ‘history’. This issue is less straightforward than it seems. In one sense, Bale’s mobilizing of the past in the interests of partisan argument and example has an obvious intention: *King Johan* seeks ‘to remake the story of the past from the point of view of...proto-Protestants’. Yet, current criticism conceives of historical interpretation in a double sense: a work’s manifest understanding of the past and how this is conditioned by its own ‘presentness’ – the contemporary experiences and values that inform any act of historical comprehension. In both these respects, Bale’s historiography is indeed manifestly ideological. In *King Johan*, past events are illuminated to expose catholicism as ‘a system of thought which propagates systematic falsehood in the selfish interest of the powerful and malign forces dominating a particular historical era’. If the extraordinary longevity and scale of catholic power is based on