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Political Theology in George Buchanan’s *Baptistes*

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‘The tragedies of Buchanan,’ noted Philip Sidney in his *Apology for Poetry* (c. 1579; printed 1595) ‘do justly bring forth a divine admiration’ (Sidney, 2002, 113). As a glance at the multitude of editions in which Buchanan’s plays and poetry appeared both during and long after his lifetime confirms, Sidney’s regard was normative rather than exceptional (see McFarlane, 1981, 490–518; Durkan, 1994). It is my argument that the interest Buchanan’s drama sustained within the period deserves reconsideration. In particular, this essay will emphasise the prescience of his scriptural tragedy on the last days of John the Baptist, *Baptistes* (c. 1539–43; printed 1577). This neglected work represents a key contribution to early modern tragic theatre and its political concerns anticipate crucial elements of subsequent achievements in this genre.

Buchanan is most familiar today as a radical political theorist, an advocate of limited and elective monarchy, the right of resistance including tyrannicide, popular sovereignty and the supremacy of law. It is in this respect that his polemical and historical writings, principally his history of Scotland (*Rerum Scoticarum Historia* (1582)) and the profoundly influential dialogue on ‘The Law of Kingship among the Scots’ (*De Jure Regni apud Scotos* (1579)), have been restored to their place at the centre of early modern political thought (see, for example, Burns, 1996, ch. 6). Yet Buchanan’s literary compositions feature less prominently in accounts of his work and influence. In the case of his plays this is, in part, because they derive from a much earlier phase of his life, long before his return to Scotland in 1560. *Baptistes* was one of four tragedies Buchanan composed or translated during his time as a schoolteacher at the Collège de Guyenne in Bordeaux in the early 1540s (McFarlane,
These works were designed for performance by his pupils, most notably the young Michel de Montaigne. Two of these plays were translations into Latin of Euripides’ *Medea* and *Alcestis* and two were independent compositions also in Latin based on scriptural episodes, *Baptistes* drawn from the New Testament and *Jephthes* from the Old. Attempts to place these plays within the trajectory of Buchanan’s intellectual development have tended to stress the latter’s continuity. For example, the author’s Victorian biographer, Hume Brown, viewed *Baptistes* simply as ‘the poetical draft of his famous tract *De Jure Regni apud Scotos*, whose publication long afterwards made him known to Europe as a political revolutionary’ (Hume Brown, 1890, 124). His modern biographer concurs and also places the work alongside *De Jure Regni* as an example of Buchanan’s ‘committed literature’ (McFarlane, 1981, 379). In these accounts, *Baptistes* expresses in embryonic form the ideas which he elaborated much more systematically in the wake of Scotland’s constitutional crisis in the 1560s.

This tradition of reading is not implausible and Buchanan himself helped to shape it. On the occasion of *Baptistes*’ first printing in 1577, he included a provocative dedication to James VI, whose tutor he had been for seven years. The play, he emphasised, would be especially edifying for the King because it ‘clearly sets forth the torments of tyrants and their miseries when most they seem to flourish, a lesson which I deem not only advantageous for you to understand, but also necessary; so that you may early begin to hate that which you must always avoid’ (Berkowitz, 1992, 351). The play’s antipathy to tyranny was also crucial to its translation into English in January 1642, the month when Charles I fled London at the outset of the civil wars. It was published by order of the ‘Committee of the House of Commons concerning Printing’ and given a vigorous new title: *Tyrannicall-Government Anatomized: Or, A Discourse Concerning Evil-Councellors*, a translation long associated with, rather than attributable to, John Milton (Berkowitz, 1992, 299–346).

However, these retrospective interpretations of *Baptistes* by both its author and other commentators in terms of Buchanan’s later commitments are not so easily aligned with the text. For example, King Herod in the play scarcely illustrates ‘the torments of tyrants and their miseries’. Indeed he begins, at least, as a thoughtful and indecisive figure who is reluctant to pursue the Baptist. Even when he does resolve to destroy the prophet, the play nowhere appeals to a concept of popular sovereignty nor does it recommend resistance. On the contrary, the Baptist insists on his obedience to temporal law – ‘I respect earthly kingdoms,’ he states ‘and I obey their kings’ (Buchanan, 1983, p. 145, l. 510) – and