A New Reading of Shakespeare's King John.

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Abstract

Shakespeare wrote King John c.1594, six years after the defeat of the Spanish Armada, and ~ 50 years after publication of the Copernican heliocentric hypothesis. It is said to be the most unhistorical of the History Plays, “anomalous,” “puzzling,” and “odd,” and as such it has engendered far more than the customary range of interpretive opinion. I suggest that the play alerts Elizabethans not just to military and political threats, but to a changing cosmic world view, all especially threatening as they arise in Catholic countries. (a) Personification characterizes the play. John personifies the old order, while Arthur and the Dauphin's armies personify the new. I suggest that Shakespeare decenters King John just as Copernicus decentered the world. (b) Hubert menaces Arthur's eyes for a whole scene (4.1), but the need for such cruelty is not explained and is especially odd as Arthur is already under sentence of death (3.3.65-66). This hitherto unexplained anomaly suggests that the old order fears what the new might see. (c) Eleanor's confession is made only to Heaven and to her son the King (1.1.42-43), yet by echoing and word play the Messenger from France later reveals to John that he is privy to it (4.2.119-124). This circumstance has not been questioned heretofore. I suggest that the Messenger is like the wily Hermes (Mercury), chief communicator of the gods and patron of the sciences; by revealing that he moves in the highest circles, he tells John that he speaks with an authority that transcends even that of a king. The message from on high presages more than political change; it warns of a new cosmic and religious world order (d) Most agree that John is a weak king, so Shakespeare must have suspected flaws in the old ways. He would have known that Tycho Brahe's new star of 1572, the comet of 1577, and the 1576 model of his compatriot Thomas Digges, were shattering old ideas. (e) The tensions of the play are not resolved because in 1594 the new order was not yet generally accepted. Instead, the new world view is announced subtly, and thereby perhaps prudently, for the onset of persecution of its advocates is only a few years away.