

John the Baptist: Protestant Character in Tudor Drama

By Kurt A. Edwards

John the Baptist plays a pivotal role in Messianic bible formation. His appearance in the beginning of the Gospels of Mark, Luke, and John parallels and ushers in the birth of the Christ in such a way that biblical persons portend the consideration that John the Baptist was either the Christ himself or the reincarnation of Elijah the prophet. It is strange then that medieval drama did not reflect this conflation, or “figura,” by placing John the Baptist’s biblical story or his character on stage as a central aspect of a drama until the 16th century. Despite nearly 500 English churches dedicated to John the Baptist at the turn of the sixteenth century, there is no record of him being the subject of any “Miracle”¹ play performed in pre-Reformation England.² Nevertheless, in approximately 1538 there appeared, like “a voice out of the desert,” three dramas that endeavored to depict the life of John the Baptist.

John Bale wrote a short play with a long title called *A Brief Comedy or Interlude of John the Baptist Preaching in the Wilderness* (“*John the Baptist Preaching*”) probably around 1538.³ George Buchanan’s *The Life and Death of John the Baptist* (“*Baptistes*”), probably written by Buchanan after fleeing to France from Scotland, predates Nicholas Grimald’s tragedy *Archipropheta* by three to six years (approximately 1540-1543). *Archipropheta*, based upon the life of the “archprophet,” John the Baptist, is one of the first Latin tragedies written in England, sometime around 1546. Another play of approximately the same theme and time (1539 or 1540), has been lost to the ages. James Wedderburn’s *The Beheading of John the Baptist* was performed at Dundee, Scotland, and is said to be a tragedy satirizing “the abuses of the Romish church.”⁴ Although it is now lost, it seems to attest to the popularity of John the Baptist as the model of a religious reformer. Considering the paucity of John the Baptist characters in previous medieval drama, this might seem coincidence. Then again, because of the Reformation, it is evident that John the Baptist, a popular medieval saint given the number of paintings depicting his life and death and the number of churches dedicated to his ministry, was emerging as a hero of this counter-movement.

What is even more unusual about these plays is that John the Baptist, as a character, has a very limited use in other types of medieval plays before these dramas. In the York Cycle, John appears in one scene and is spoken about in another scene between the Virgin Mary and Elizabeth, John's pregnant mother. However, it is impossible to pinpoint an exact date in which John was included in the York Cycle as it had many transformations during its production life. For that reason, it is possible that this particular rendition of the York Cycle was written after these other representing dramas. Additionally, there was one very short play originally published in 1468 called *The Prologues of the Demon and of John the Baptist* that has John the Baptist as a character. In the play, the character of the Demon speaks for approximately three modern pages in length and then John speaks for approximately one page. John's function is to let the Demon know that the age of Jesus is coming, but he does not speak of baptism or his biblical story in any way. Why then did John the Baptist, and his story, feature prominently during the later Tudor period, and what drove multiple playwrights to write of the Saint in a relatively short period of time – approximately eight years? If plays of the period were, in some way, to teach the masses about the tenets of theology as much of medieval drama had been,⁵ perhaps a new understanding and furtherance of baptism as a prominent feature of Christian life could be rewarded as the cause. Coupled with the rise of Protestantism in England, Thomas Cranmer's *Common Book of Prayer*, and Henry VIII revisions of the Six Articles Act in 1539 which endorsed the orthodox view of transubstantiation (and ultimately led to Bale's self-exile from England),⁶ there is a strong cause-and-effect relationship to the prominence given to John the Baptist. Perhaps these plays were attempting to uphold the one sacrament universally endorsed by Protestants: baptism. Alternatively, perhaps it is only zealotry on behalf of these individuals. This paper explores these questions with an examination of all three plays and the agenda that each is seemingly attempting to forward. To provide context, I also examine the historical implications when each play was written to understand why John the Baptist was accepted as a meaningful dramatic character at this particular place and time. First, the three playwrights:

John Bale, an English reformer and dramatist, was born in 1495 in Suffolk. Educated at Jesus College at the University of Cambridge, Bale became an ardent Protestant and devoted his life to religious debate. He was notorious as a zealot and as a prolific writer of learned and bitterly argumentative works. Bale often subordinated "his drama to his political purpose, but he clearly regarded his roles as reformer and propagandist

as more important than that of entertainer.”⁷ Although *Kynge Johan* (1538) is perhaps his most famous play (mostly because of its consideration as the first historical drama penned in England), *John the Baptist Preaching* is perhaps his most ardent anti-papal, anti-Catholic play. In the play, Bale seems to be dramatizing his academic work of the same period, *Three Laws of Nature, New Comedy and Interlude Concerning the Three Laws of Nature, Moises, and Christ, Corrupted by the Sodomites, Pharisees, and Papists*. In this long-titled work, Bale endeavors to expose the wrongs of the Papal state, equating them to the biblical inhabitants of Sodom and the Jewish pharisees of Christ’s period. One study remarks that Bale’s polemical intention with *John the Baptist Preaching* was “to advance the cause of the Reformation by exhibiting the patriotic objection to the power of the Pope.”⁸ Bale was, by all accounts, a hardened Protestant reformer who conveyed his fanaticism when any opportunity presented itself.

George Buchanan was born in 1506 at Moss, near Killearn, Stirlingshire. His father died when George was seven and the family moved to Cardross, Scotland, where Buchanan would be educated.⁹ While at university in Paris, Buchanan’s fellow students were John Calvin and Ignatius Loyola. Although there is no direct evidence that Buchanan was on friendly terms with either religious reformer, it is at least feasible (based in part on the political savvy nature of his plays) that he was acquainted with them, for Buchanan had the ability to remain on speaking terms with people who were themselves violently opposed to one another. For example, later in his life Buchanan remained on friendly terms with both Queen Mary (at least until he became convinced of her complicity in the murder of her husband, Darnley) and with the Earl of Moray (Mary’s half-brother and lay leader of the Reformers). Buchanan straddled the fence theologically and developed intellectually along the same lines as Erasmus and Thomas More, that is, anti-obscurantism rather than pro-Reformation, only turning to a more adamant and vociferous Reformation stance after his return to Scotland in 1560.¹⁰

Among Buchanan’s many satires against Catholics, his *Franciscanus* may be considered the most famous, if only because it formed one of the bases of the indictment laid against him by the Franciscans. It appeared in 1538 (the same year as Bale’s work) and was the reason for his arrest and exile the following year, sending Buchanan to England and then to France.¹¹ Buchanan’s other important works were *Jephthes*, in which he inveighs against political tyranny with underlying pro-Reformist themes, and *Baptistes*, following the same anti-tyrannical premise. Taken together,

Buchanan's pro-Reformation stance was most assured. However, unlike Bale, Buchanan was much more political in his religiosity, able to separate argument and proceed lightly with those whom he disagreed.

Nicholas Grimald was born in Huntingdonshire in 1519 and educated at Christ College, Cambridge. Shortly after his installation as a lecturer at Oxford in 1547, Grimald became chaplain to Bishop Ridley, imprisoned because of his anti-Catholic stances. Grimald's connection with Ridley brought him under suspicion and he was later imprisoned as well.¹² Two of Grimald's Latin tragedies, *Christus redivivus* and *Archipropheta sive Johannes Baptista*, are extant. They were both printed at Cologne in 1548 and probably performed at Oxford two years prior.¹³ It cannot be determined whether Grimald was familiar with Buchanan's *Baptistes*, but it is documented that by 1550 Bale and Grimald were close friends.¹⁴ Interestingly, Bale categorized Grimald's work, writing that Grimald "fervently showed and taught that our salvation is alone in Jesus the Saviour, and that he himself was intent not on his own, but on the divine glory. What liberality can be greater, what generosity can be broader, than to impart to others free of charge what we have learned at great expense and with labor, as our friend Grimald did."¹⁵ Knowing of their friendship and their compatible Protestant views indicates that Bale could have had influence on Grimald's desire to write his own "John the Baptist" play. Their execution is markedly different, but their subject matter and intent are undeniably the same – to write pro-Reformation polemics.

Grimald's drama provides a purely romantic motive for the catastrophe¹⁶ in the passionate attachment of Herodias to Herod and he constantly resorts to lyrical methods, while Bale and Buchanan's dramas are more straightforward with plodding arguments. The stress on action in Grimald's *Archipropheta* contrasts with both Buchanan and Bale, which are both somewhat devoid of action. It would be easy to separate Grimald's play from these other two because of the varying ways in which they were written, but considering the disquieting aspects of the period it is equally as difficult to dismiss their function as a group. In fact, Grimald simply is a more action-oriented playwright (an aspect that is particularly agreeable to contemporary readers),¹⁷ especially when compared to Bale and Buchanan.

The time and place that these three dramatists penned their John the Baptist plays represented some of the most troubling in England's history, and the surrounding years (1531-1554) are paramount in what made England a nation of Protestants. Spurring this climactic period of change

was the struggle over religious supremacy and, most significantly, whether Henry VIII's church should have the appearance of anything Catholic. There seems to be a concerted effort to break with these notions, and this is where we see these three plays emerge. While all are seemingly pro-Reformation, Bale's contains the most obvious anti-Catholic rhetoric. With this said, we know by Buchanan's other writings that his *Baptistes* had anti-Catholic sentiments, mostly given the fact that the play deals with the sacrament of baptism and no others. Together with Buchanan's other original play, *Jephthes*, we see a clearly directed polemic "against hypocrisy and idolatry in religious people, and also against tyranny" but we also see an "opposition between pure and corrupt religion."¹⁸ *Baptistes* also includes rhetoric that seems to aim directly at the Jesuits, who at this time were being legitimized by Pope Paul III. In 1542, the Pope established the Roman Inquisition, which followed an act of English Parliament declaring authority of the Pope void in England in 1536. In 1543, the first Protestants burned at the stake in the Spanish Inquisition. There are definitely theological battles between the two passionate positions. This same political, religious, and violent invective is also making its way into the dramatic efforts of many forward thinkers, including Bale, Buchanan, and Grimald.

Further indication of theological fracas is that during this time the Catholic Council of Trent formed. The council opened at Trent on December 13, 1545, and closed there on December 4, 1563. The Council of Trent's main objective was the determination of Church doctrine in answer to the "heresies" of the Protestants; another objective was the execution of thorough reform of the inner life of the Church by removing the numerous abuses that had developed in it. The Council of Trent defined the differences between the Catholic and Protestant positions and formalized the ideals, doctrines, and laws of the Roman Catholic Church. Although the Council addressed issues raised by the Protestant Reformers, only cardinals, bishops, and heads of Catholic orders could speak and vote during its full sessions; Protestants were invited only to send representatives.¹⁹ Because Protestant reformers were not given a mouthpiece at the Council indicates another reason why perhaps theological arguments are being brought out using "medieval drama" educative strategies.

These issues, as well as the subsequent disagreements over the sacraments the Protestants recognized as doctrinal led to these three plays, all of which espouse Protestant doctrine in that baptism is displayed as the sacrament of choice. As said before, Bale's drama is the most assuredly anti-Catholic given its lines to "flee men's traditions," its promotion

of “forgiveness by faith” only and not by “good works, nor merits of your fathers, your fastings, long prayers,” and especially the last lines which call Christians to not “believe neither Pope, nor priest of his consent.”²⁰ Additionally, of Bale’s *Kynge Johan*, “It is possible that Bale and a troupe of players were being used in a propaganda campaign to support the Reformation cause.”²¹ With this being speculative for *Kynge Johan*, it is assured that this was true for Bale’s *John the Baptist Preaching*.

L. R. Merrill argues that Grimald’s *Archiphrotheta* does not contain “a thesis, as did Bale, who used his play as a vehicle for the exposition of his anti-papal doctrine; nor as Buchanan, whose theme was human liberty crying out against tyranny and priestcraft.”²² However, given the clashes between Catholics and Protestants of the time, it would be almost impossible to compose a play depicting John the Baptist that would not espouse Protestant belief, especially in light of Bale’s and Buchanan’s plays written immediately prior. Furthermore, Grimald writes in his introduction to *Archiphrotheta* that “this history of John the Baptist” is intended “not only to delight the learned, but also to profit those of cruder intelligence,” which may indicate Grimald constructed this play to appeal to more than an academic audience. Later Grimald writes, “Here the reader or the spectator will learn true, genuine, unfeigned repentance, the way to approach Christ, and the lesson the first preacher of the Gospel so strongly impressed upon the minds of men.” And later, “He [the reader or spectator] will also see how hypocrites delight in themselves, . . . and how they either dissolutely neglect pure religion or attack it hostilely.”²³ These words indicate a polemic, and given the scrapes already flourishing coupled with Grimald’s religious ideology, the best guess would be Grimald is aiming his polemic in the same directions as Bale’s and Buchanan’s.

Further indication of Grimald’s ideology is in *Archiphrotheta*’s prologue, given by Jehovah who says, “The way should be made straight for the Lord: hope in human wisdom, evil worship, vain-glory in works, in short, all wicked things, must be put aside; our voice must be harkened to, and in God must trust be placed.”²⁴ Here, through Grimald’s mouthpiece, Jehovah seems to be arguing *against* works-based forgiveness (similar to Bale) and *for* direct relationship with God, not through an intermediary priest. Later the chorus declares, “Neither the priests, nor the Pharisees, nor the Levites, skilled in deceit, were able to flatter him [John the Baptist] with new titles.”²⁵ This could be read as a conflation of Catholic leadership with those of biblical Judaism, all “skilled in deceit.” Lastly, in the play, Grimald embarks on a treatise of baptism when John, Herod, and Herodias

have a conversation about the path to God. John nearly convinces Herod to repent through baptism, only to be thwarted by Herodias who reminds Herod that because she was his brother's wife first, she would have to be discarded. Herod quickly realizes he does not want to lose his wife for a new religion. John does not mention any way to salvation other than this act that "cleanses the defiled conscience of its foul sin, and renews the heart."²⁶ In this representation of baptism as the sacrament that leads to salvation, and the abandonment of other Catholic sacraments, there is an overt implication of these other sacraments and the elevation of baptism.

Similar to Grimald's drama, Buchanan's *Baptistes* depicts the conflict that led to John's beheading, but he sidesteps any dramatic action, relying upon heavy narration to present the political and spiritual issues. It has been speculated that this is because Buchanan wrote the play for his students while in exile in Bordeaux "to provide practice in Latin pronunciation."²⁷ While this may be, Buchanan's pro-Reformation leanings cannot be denied. Either way, the overwhelming feature of the play is its anti-tyrannical stance. However, when coupled with the "hero of the Reformation," John the Baptist, there is also a flavor of anti-establishment, and this would include the Roman church. Buchanan makes his play a vehicle for a political message as well as religious by depicting tyrants who should succumb to the masses' wishes. Furthermore, like Bale, Buchanan emphasizes man's victory of fate through faith, disavowing works-based Catholicism. Buchanan's play concludes with the celebration of John the Baptist as a supporter of the "truth on behalf of religion and ancestral laws" and declares that we "in our prayers" should "ask for a similar end of life for ourselves."²⁸

Clearly then, pro-Reformation playwrights who advocated religious doctrine based on Protestant viewpoints wrote these three plays. The fervent nature of these dramatists' beliefs cannot be overstated. Although Bale is the most vocal in his vehemence, Buchanan (despite his exile for his *Franciscanus*) undoubtedly understood the political ramifications of his principles and played both religious sides, while Grimald seems to have the appropriate professional connections to indicate his Protestant dictates (Bale and Bishop Ridley). Therefore, it is easily comprehensible that their views would penetrate their writings, especially considering the amount of Protestant punch we can see in all three plays.

Almost as important as the playwrights' views, whereas any Catholic "Miracle" play would use "St." in the title (as in St. John the Baptist), none

of these plays do, alternatively opting to merely assert “John the Baptist” as the title character – a possible shot at the higher church. Furthermore, with the physical and political religious battles occurring over the “correct” way to approach the Christian God, it cannot be assumed that presenting a character of sacrament, as John the Baptist, who clearly and powerfully represents baptism, is benign. No, these plays, *John the Baptist Preaching*, *Baptistes*, and *Archipropheta* are all anti-Catholic in their doctrine. While Bale’s play may be the most outwardly harsh in its direct argument against Catholicism, Buchanan’s is forged in a similar didactic manner with less fiery language. Grimald’s dramatic presentation of the complete John the Baptist biblical story obviously holds up John the Baptist as a heroic figure, to which honor and sacrifice must be made.

This view of these playwrights as polemical and educative in nature supports James Forse’s insight that producers of medieval drama used their art to provide theological education to the masses. Furthermore, this view advances Forse’s insight into Tudor drama as well. With these educative devices, it is no stretch to see that some Tudor drama had the intent to educate their masses with a theologically Protestant turn, using John the Baptist as the audience-friendly protagonist. This view also moves the political-turned-theological battles of England into the realm of the dramatic. Propaganda comes in all forms and the theatre is not exempt from this practice. Finally, the absence of any other sacraments promoted by the Catholic Church supports these three playwrights’ furtherance of an independent church built on faith, not works. The Protestant Reformers believed they were founding their arguments biblically on the only two sacraments that Jesus Christ himself took part – communion and baptism. Bale, Buchanan, and Grimald presumably felt called to advance these sacraments as the only “true” aspects of religious following. Placing John the Baptist as the central dramatic figure on stage allows for the promotion of baptism as one of two (and only two) integral aspects of Christianity.

NOTES

1. What we now call a miracle-play is a sequence of episodes taken from the life of some wonder-working saint.
2. Howard B. Norland, *Drama in Early Tudor Britain, 1485-1558* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 319.
3. *John the Baptist Preaching* is the second short play in a sort of trilogy by Bale. Its companion pieces, *God’s Promises* and *The Temptation of Our Lord*, contain John the Baptist as a character, but do not diatribe against the Catholic Church with the same unmistakable rhetoric as *John the Baptist Preaching*.

4. Norland, *Drama in Early Tudor Britain, 1485-1558*, 321.
5. See James Forse, "Religious Drama and Ecclesiastical Reform in the Tenth Century," *Early Theatre*, ed. Helen Ostovich (vol. 5.2, 2002).
6. Thora Balslev Blatt, *The Plays of John Bale: A Study of Ideas, Technique and Style* (Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gad Publishers, 1968), 14-15.
7. Norland, *Drama in Early Tudor Britain, 1485-1558*, 191.
8. George Saintsbury, *Short History of English Literature* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1966), 227.
9. P. Sharratt and P.G. Walsh, eds., *George Buchanan Tragedies* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1983) 1-4.
10. *Ibid.*, 11-15.
11. *Ibid.*, 17.
12. L.R. Merrill, *The Life and Poems of Nicholas Grimald* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 6-11.
13. *Ibid.*, 13.
14. Norland, *Drama in Early Tudor Britain, 1485-1558*, 320.
15. Quoted in Merrill, *The Life and Poems of Nicholas Grimald*, 17.
16. The catastrophe refers to the final event of the dramatic action.
17. Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* is similar in action, if not scope.
18. Sharratt, *George Buchanan Tragedies*, 13.
19. Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform: 1250-1550* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 407-09.
20. Peter Happé, *John Bale* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 39-42.
21. Norland, *Drama in Early Tudor Britain, 1485-1558*, 191.
22. Merrill, *The Life and Poems of Nicholas Grimald*, 224.
23. *Ibid.*, 235.
24. *Ibid.*, 241.
25. *Ibid.*, 255.
26. *Ibid.*, 285.
27. Norland, *Drama in Early Tudor Britain, 1485-1558*, 320.
28. Sharratt, *George Buchanan Tragedies*, 164.

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