

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Life and Death of King John

(Written 1590's; first published in *First Folio*, 1623)

Shakespeare

Overview The tragedy of *King John* was first published in the First Folio of 1623, though we believe it was written during the mid 1590's. Like the *Henriad* (1590-1592) and *Richard II* (1595) the present play concerns the power politics of the nascent English state—though with King John (reigned 1199-1216) we return to the most archaic of Shakespeare's British historical plays, in which we are truly in the formation of British nationhood. (The play will end with a sermon from The Bastard, on the importance, for Britons, of avoidance of petty bickering.) The power politics up front, in the present play, is largely international, involving the coalescing of land and dynastic control between England and France. Like the *Henriad*, *King John* is locked into the issue of great family conflict within the slowly developing British noble aristocracy.

History proper. Unlike the great history plays concerned largely with the play of character—*Henry IV, Parts I and II*, *Henry V*, *Henry VIII*—*King John* and the *Henriad* distribute their attention over a wide geopolitical landscape of events; in this work we feel Shakespeare discovering his own nation, and in fact his own self, through a balancing off of past against present. Only the examination of his own national makings and breakings could eventually establish his personal sense of being in history, a sense requisite for the greatest of Shakespeare's tragedies, the *Hamlet*, *Lear*, *Macbeth* which lie a half dozen years in the future.

Characters

King John, King of England
Eleanor, the queen mother, widow of Henry II
Prince Henry, King John's son, later King Henry III
Blanche of Castille, King John's niece
Earl of Essex
Early of Salisbury
Earl of Pembroke
Peter of Pomfret, a prophet
Philip Faulconbridge, also known as Philip the Bastard,
Robert Faulconbridge, his half brother
Lady Constance, widow of Geoffrey II
Arthur, her son, John's nephew
King Philip, King of France
Louis the Dauphin, heir to the French throne
Hubert
Cardinal Pandolf, ambassador from the Pope

Story

Embassy. King John and the queen mother, Elinor, are meeting in the King's palace, when the royals are interrupted by an ambassador from the King of France. This dignitary informs John that the French have firmly concluded that John is not the legitimate King of England, but that the throne belongs to his nephew Arthur, King John's nephew. (Lady Constance, the mother of Arthur, has strongly promoted her claim at the French court.) The King of France insists on the recognition of Arthur, as the legitimate King of England, and therefore lays claim to vast tracts of land, in England itself and Western France.

War. King John, immediately understanding the disastrous blow for England, compacted in this dynastic claim, sends the French ambassador packing, with the assurance that England is immediately ready to go to war over this issue. The intricacies of dynastic legitimacy, which we see central to all of Shakespeare's nation building dramas, are the keys of power, and cannot be fiddled lightly with. The simultaneous concern of the British court, with the claims to legitimacy of the Faulconbridge brothers, one of whom, the Bastard, will be a central spokesperson and critic for King John, simply reinforces the contemporary preoccupation with lineage.

Angiers. For the rival forces, France and England, the hold out point proves to be the French city of Angiers, which has walled itself in with heavy fortifications, and refuses to capitulate either to France or to England, until she knows who is the legitimate ruler, of the nation state that is vying for her. Angiers thereby becomes a common target for both sides in the ensuing propaganda war. Philip (the French king) and King John address the citizens of Angiers, by turn, and with the formality of an ancient Roman court scene they make their cases as potential regents of the besieged city. The residents of Angiers are treated to equally intense, opposing view points from Queens Elinor (mother of King John) and Constance (mother of Arthur, and widow of Geoffrey II). Finally these good citizens of Angier, unable to be persuaded by the arguments of either side, come up with their own proposal to the looming international crisis; with the coolness of the Melians, in the brutal debate Thucydides puts at the center of his history, the citizens of Angiers propose a marital alliance they hope will be win-win for both France and England.

Compromise. The compromise proposed by the wise citizens of Angiers is this: that rather than fighting, a marriage should be arranged which would bring together the two sides. This marriage, which the Archbishop would sanction, would bring together Louis the dauphin, heir to the French throne, and Blanche of Castille, the niece of King John; by the union, which was heartily approved by the two parties, King John's claims to the throne of France are enhanced and Blanche of Castille establishes multiple potent sub lineages both in France and in England. The only losers in this compromise are Arthur, whose claims on the English throne are disregarded, and his mother, Lady Constance, for whom Arthur is the rightful and legitimate heir to that throne. Lady Constance's fury, and position in French power politics, are so great that she herself assembles a mighty army to take over the throne of England.

Arthur. War, after all, becomes the central event of the play, and a segue into the final lesson the play teaches the English, that petty internal bickering can easily become their national downfall. Yet en route to that finale Shakespeare introduces the kind of nail biting melodrama he knows how to unpack. King John, in his eagerness to get rid of Arthur, has him imprisoned, and readied for secret murder—one more voice of opposition out of the way. But this malevolent plan does not work out. Hubert, a citizen of Angiers, and childhood playmate of Arthur, is appointed to gouge out the eyes of Arthur, then to leave him to a tender execution at the hands of two waiting thugs. At the last minute, however, Hubert is unable to carry through on the action, which is too horribly against the grain; he sequesters the youngster, then proclaims his death.

Recanting. To this revelation however the English court's reaction is great distress; such a murder of the young is an intolerable move, even in international politics. The melodrama of the near murder, with its recall of childhood games between the two young men, is heart wrenching and when it transpires, not much later, that the supposedly living Arthur has in fact fallen off the castle wall and died, we feel that Arthur has become the most emotionally rich figure in the play. (We are also left in uncertainty, whether Arthur has truly fallen to his death, or has in fact been murdered by King John's men.)

Consequences. The upshot of the present conflict, between the forces of Lady Constance, and those of King John, is that John himself, who has been on the losing side of a Papal battle to excommunicate him, is poisoned by a disgruntled monk, while the embattled English nobles unite under the banner of John's son, Prince Henry, and pull themselves together. Meanwhile the French fleet of Lady Constance, bringing troops for the grand battle, runs aground on the sands and is destroyed. Victory goes to the English, and with it the lesson that they should remain united—tighten up their dynastic interrelationships, and assure the legitimacy of their rulers.

Themes

Legitimacy. The action trigger, of the present play, is the King of France's claim that the present King of England is illegitimate, not the proper ruler of England, and that he should be replaced by Arthur, King John's nephew. This French claim opens an immediate threat to King John, who declares war on France.

Jealousy. There is one conspicuous and very consequential case of jealousy in the present play, that of the mother of Arthur, who believes (and is supported in this by the French king) that her son by Geoffrey II, brother to King John, is the legitimate heir to the British throne. Because she and her line have been illegitimately excluded from the British line, she is angry and jealous (of King John and his family) and prepared to launch a French army of her own, to reclaim her and her son's rights in England.

Pity. Shakespeare masterfully evokes our pity for Arthur, at the moment when Hubert, his childhood buddy, has been assigned the job of blinding Arthur, and then of turning him over to two Tower thugs, for murder. Apparently the evocation was too intense for Shakespeare himself, for he makes Hubert recant, and saves the innocent French lad.

Form Shakespeare, who is in general not a formal, but rather a 'naturalistic' depicter of nature gives unusual attention to formal details in King John. The entire play turns on a two-part, mutually miming, set of circumstances, in both France and England. The citizens of Angiers listen to a formally balanced set of pleas from, respectively, the plenipotentiaries of France and England, as well as from their wives. The whole play is about legitimacy, and where, more clearly than in questions of legitimacy, do we encounter the juxtaposition of the balanced and harmonious with the non-matching?

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

King John

Character The main character is King John, but in the largely formal sense that he is a figurehead around whom the decisive action of the play turns. He is decisive when it comes to shoring up his own throne, but not inventive when it comes to alternatives to war. (There it is the citizens of Angiers who excel.) John makes a good case for his own position, when it comes to the persuasion of the Angiers citizens, but it is they who ultimately come up with a solution. John is behind the plot to get rid of Arthur, his de facto rival for the British throne, and is quite possibly (we are not certain) responsible for the sufferings and death of innocent Arthur.

Parallels. Like the ancient Greek hero, Oedipus, John passes a certain point in his desire to establish certainty for himself. Oedipus makes the fatal mistake of killing his father in a chariot accident—fearing for his life. John makes a similar self-protective move in ordering the blinding and then murder of Arthur. John resembles the Homeric figure, Agamemnon, who was a central figure in the Greek expedition against Troy, and whose vacillating militant relation to Achilles, like that of John to the French king Philippe, was fraught with danger in the execution of political alliances.

Illustrative moments

Militant. 'The thunder of my cannons shall be heard,' says John, as the French ambassador hastily exits, having delivered his hot message from the King of France. King John is ready to declare war on France, if that is required in order to reject the French claims to the British throne.

Oratorical. John makes an impassioned speech, to the citizens of Angiers, urging the advantages of alliance with the British throne. He is partly responsible for the Angiers decision to try a new alternative to war.

Anti-papal. From the outset of the play John know that the forces of the Catholic Church, strongly embedded in France, will do what they can to excommunicate him for an allegedly illegitimate marriage. In the end John is, in fact, excommunicated.

Wheedling. Having determined that Hubert is the proper torturer of Arthur, John brings all his oratorical power to bear on convincing this young man to take on his dreadful assignment, which at the end he consents to do.

Fearsome. Having decided to have Arthur blinded, then murdered, John is seized with fear of public opinion. With great anxiety he questions Hubert whether Arthur is truly dead, hoping (against hope) for the response that the youngster is still living.

Discussion questions

How do you like the present play? It is not a favorite of Shakespeare fans. How would you explain that? Is it one of your favorites? Why?

King John is set in an era two hundred years prior to the *Henriad*. How does Shakespeare register what marks King John as about the late twelfth century, rather than about the late fourteenth century, or is Shakespeare a historian who does not respond to issues of that sort?

Does the 'moral' of the present play, that the British nobles should stop their bickering among each other, and get down to building a state, also serve as the moral of the *Henriad*?