

The Historical King John

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Today, King John is a little-known historical figure. If you are a student of history, you might connect him to the Magna Carta; if you are a student of romance literature (or Disney films), you might recognize him as the nemesis of Robin Hood. For Shakespeare's contemporaries, however, King John was a compelling figure—a complicated king whose reign resonated with the anxieties of the day. In *King John*, Shakespeare addresses the fears of England as a land of civil disputes, subject to foreign invasion and Papal interference. The most pressing and controversial issues in the play are questions of succession and legitimacy.

Shakespeare used several sources for the story—relying predictably on Holinshed, the official Tudor chronicler, as well as John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*. As always, Shakespeare's adaptation of historical facts—or what were taken to be facts—reveals his thematic and dramatic intentions.

The play opens in roughly 1199 with the French making gestures of aggression toward King John. France disputes John's right to be king—backing instead his nephew Arthur, the son of John's older brother Geoffrey. Presumably, King Philip of France likes the thought of a French-raised, very young king in England—a king who might be easy to influence and more favorably inclined toward France. And Arthur's claim to the throne is not so easily dismissed, as John's mother even admits.

Arthur's claim pits inheritance by primogeniture against inheritance by will—a pertinent tension in Shakespeare's day. Primogeniture meant that the oldest son inherited everything—and that all of his direct descendants would be in line to inherit ahead of any of his younger siblings or their descendants. Arthur, as the son of John's older brother Geoffrey, would have the stronger claim under primogeniture. However, this mode of succession by no means an irrefutable given. John has the throne by way of his oldest brother King Richard I, also known as “Richard Lion Heart.” Richard chose John as his successor.

Following closely on the heels of this charged audience with the French ambassador, a domestic incident of inheritance plays out—one with suggestive political undertones. Robert and Philip Falconbridge arrive on the scene to contest their inheritance—the younger claiming that his older brother Philip is illegitimate.

In a breath-taking turn of fortune, Philip—or “the Bastard” as he is referred to throughout the play—accedes to this accusation, gives up his land, and stays in the court. The reason? His claimed paternity is that of King Richard I. While Holinshed mentions an illegitimate (and unlikely) son of Richard's in passing, Shakespeare elevates the figure to a major player.

Illegitimate though he may be, the Bastard sees much to be gained in giving up his ostensible birthright for a life in the court. John himself renames Philip by knighting him as “Richard Plantagenet” a name dripping with legitimacy, “Plantagenet” going back to John's grandfather. The whole scene is an invention of Shakespeare's and with it, he foregrounds and complicates notions of inheritance and succession. Legitimacy, it seems, is a social construction, something that can be invented on the spot—in this case, by John.

No one in Shakespeare's audience would be deaf to the echoes of Elizabeth I's own troubled ascension to the throne—and concerns about who would succeed her. So touchy was this topic that Elizabeth made it illegal to discuss her title or successor during her lifetime. Her father, Henry VIII had declared both Elizabeth and her sister Mary bastards—thus, making

them ineligible to reign; he was succeeded by his son Edward—and Henry’s will stipulated that the succession should follow his younger sister’s heirs. Edward died as a teenager and was succeeded by Mary Tudor in spite of her father’s will. Her short, troubled, and bloody reign was followed by the ascension of Elizabeth, again ignoring the Act of Succession that declared her illegitimate.

In spite of her tremendous popularity and skill as a monarch, Elizabeth was not free from issues of succession during her reign. Declaring herself the virgin queen, Elizabeth never married. Without children of her own, there was no obvious successor. At the time Shakespeare wrote *King John*, Elizabeth was in her 60’s—a ripe old age for the time. She could die soon—and leave England vulnerable, without a monarch and possibly subject to foreign invasion and civil unrest as a result. With his alterations to the source material, Shakespeare treads a careful path—one allowing him to reflect on England’s political concerns at a safe historical distance.

Shakespeare’s other alterations to his sources have more to do with how he presents John himself. In the canon of Shakespeare’s plays, John stands out as an enigmatic and fascinating king. Neither the thorough hero of Henry V or the ambitious villain of Richard III, John emerges as a conflicted, emotional man.

Shakespeare’s contemporaries would find much to admire in John. He was the son of formidable parents—King Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine as well as the brother and designated heir of Richard Lion Heart, hero of the Crusades. John’s standing up to the Pope and even his excommunication would likely score him points in Elizabeth’s reign—when the Queen’s own safety had been threatened by the Pope and anti-Catholicism lingered in the wake of Bloody Mary’s overzealous burnings of non-Catholic “heretics.” However, John was later referred to as “bad King John”—his reputation sullied by the controversial death of his nephew Arthur.

Shakespeare walks an interesting line with John and Arthur. Historically, it is unclear what actually happened to Arthur although it seems likely that John had a hand in his death. He did imprison Arthur—which caused much public outcry. His refusal to produce Arthur in public to quell the controversy suggested to his subjects that he had Arthur killed. Shakespeare does not fully implicate John in his nephew’s death. While Shakespeare makes Arthur younger in the play than he was historically and thus more innocent and sympathetic, he also makes John technically innocent of his death. Instead, he turns our attention to the King’s psychological and emotional state; Shakespeare points to his desperation and cruelty toward Arthur as the moment when John begins to fall apart.

The compression of history in the play gives us insight into the story that Shakespeare wanted to tell. The figure of the Bastard may be somewhat modeled on the historical figure of Faukes do Breuté—a man of common or illegitimate origins who was promoted to lead John’s army toward the end of the King’s reign. Fortune seemed to work in his favor—as in the Bastard’s. In Shakespeare play, King John’s arc moves downward as the Bastard’s moves up. Against this backdrop of shifting Fortune, Shakespeare, as always, reveals human complexity and fallibility—even in the figure of a king.