

**TITLE:** ***King John*** (*The Life and Death of King John*)

**CATEGORY, YEAR WRITTEN, TEXT:**

History; 1595-1596; 2,648 lines; 100% verse

(One of only four Shakespearean plays written in 100% verse:  
*King John*, *Richard II*, *Henry VI Part 1*, and *Henry VI Part 2*.)



**SYNOPSIS:**

**BACKSTORY:** Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine had four grown sons: Henry, Richard, Geoffrey, and John. Henry II and his eldest three sons have all died by now, and John has usurped the throne with his mother's support. However, Geoffrey's son Arthur lays claim to the crown with the support of France. King John refuses to abdicate the throne, and France and England go to war.

**AS THE PLAY OPENS:** Two sons of Lord Falconbridge arrive, seeking mediation from the king regarding their inheritance. The eldest son, Philip, is allegedly a bastard, and therefore ineligible for his inheritance. He is recognized as sharing physical attributes of the late King Richard, and Lady Falconbridge admits to his parentage – Eleanor offers him a knightship (though without land or claim to the throne), which he accepts.

France and England approach the town of Angiers, demanding to be let in. The citizens agree to admit the "true king", as determined by a battle. The outcome is ambiguous, and the town citizens propose that the two sides unite via a marriage between Blanche of Spain (John's niece) and Lewis the Dauphin of France. They comply, uniting the two countries in peace, and the Bastard (Phillip Falconbridge) is disgusted at the nobilities' display of fickleness and hypocrisy. Constance is devastated at King Philip's abandoning her son's claim to the crown.

Cardinal Pandulph then brings King John instructions from the Pope regarding the appointment of Archbishop of Canterbury. King John refuses to comply, and is thus excommunicated. Pandulph then demands that France break their truce with England and go to war, or else also be excommunicated. France complies, much to Blanche's devastation. The English then capture Arthur, and John commissions Hubert to murder the boy. Pandulph, convinced that Arthur will be killed, urges France to invade and for Lewis to lay claim to the English throne.

When Hubert goes to murder Arthur, the boy pleads for his life. Hubert is moved and unable to follow through with his task. He perpetuates rumors of Arthur's death, while putting the boy into hiding. Meanwhile, John is being crowned a second time, and several lords ask him to release Arthur so as not to engender ire from the English people. However, Hubert brings word of Arthur's "death". At the same time, John learns of the deaths of Constance and Eleanor, and a soothsayer prophesies that he will give up his crown before the next Ascension Day. Meanwhile, Arthur dies from a fall as he attempts to win his freedom. The English lords from the previous scene discover his body, and join sides with the Dauphin in revenge.

John eventually makes peace with Rome and surrenders his crown to Pandulph, receiving it back in the name of the Pope (thus, he thinks, fulfilling the prophesy with no ill consequences). Despite John's reconciliation with the church, the Dauphin refuses to call off the impending battle. The English lords learn of the Dauphin's plan to execute them after the battle, and return to John's side. John comes down with a fever, and is taken to an abbey where he is poisoned by a monk. On his deathbed, he pardons the English lords, and his son, Prince Henry, returns. The French retreat, Henry is in line to be the next King of England (Henry III), and the Bastard claims that England will never be defeated so long as it is united.

**MAJOR CHARACTERS** (number of lines in parentheses):

Fighting for England/John

**King John (441)**

Eleanor (55)

Prince Henry (30)

**Hubert (205)**

**Philip the Bastard (523)**

Blanche of Spain (42)

Fighting against England/for Arthur

Arthur (120)

**Constance (264)**

**King Philip II of France (193)**

Lewis, the Dauphin (154)

Cardinal Pandulph (164)

**MAJOR THEMES/IMAGERY:**

- Form, shape, face – inherited traits (specifically among nobility)
- Nobility, virtue, courage – regardless of noble birth
- Inheritance, family, parentage
- Loyalty, patriotism, traitors
- Love and bonds: family, marriage, country
- Religion, the church, the Pope, free will v. fate, omens

**FAMOUS LINES/SCENES:**

- “Your strong possession much more than your right” (Eleanor about King John, 1.1)
- “I am I, howe’er I was begot” (Bastard, 1.1)
- France and England seek entrance to Angiers (2.1)
- Eleanor and Constance verbal battle before Angiers (2.1)
- “I am not worth this coil that’s made for me!” (Arthur, 2.1)
- “Mad world! Mad kings! Mad composition!” (Bastard’s monologue, 2.1)
- Lewis refuses to withdraw troops despite John’s reconciliation with Rome. “I will not back.” (Lewis’ monologue, 5.2)
- “False blood to false blood join’d!” (Constance monologue, 3.1)
- Constance praises Arthur’s corporeal beauty as exemplary of his nobility. “If thou, that bid’st me be content, wert grim...” (Constance monologue, 3.1)
- King John renounces the Pope. “No Italian priest / shall tithe or toll in our dominions.” (John, 3.1)
- “Whoever wins, on that side shall I lose” (Blanche, 3.1)
- “Death.” “My lord?” “A grave.” “He shall not live.” (John and Hubert, 3.3)
- “Grief fills the room up of my absent child.” (Constance’s monologues, 3.4)
- Arthur pleads for his life from Hubert. (4.1)
- Arthur falls to his death. (4.3)
- “This England never did, nor never shall, / Lie at the foot of a proud conqueror, / But when it first did help to wound itself.” (Bastard’s closing lines, 5.7)

**The Bastard**

The most unique character in *King John*, The Bastard satirizes and critiques the nobility, yet also rises to the occasion and exemplifies English patriotism. The audience can most easily identify with his character, since he shares his thoughts and motives, and often even speaks directly to the audience. The Bastard voices criticism of monarchical power and inheritance – an issue particularly poignant to audiences during Queen Elizabeth’s reign.

**PRODUCTIONS OF NOTE:**

- Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey, dir. Paul Mullins, 2003
- Royal Shakespeare Company, dir. Gregory Doran, 2002
- BBC, dir. David Giles, starring Leonard Rossiter and George Costigan, 1984
- Dir. Peter Brook, 1945
- Dir. Robert Mantell, 1915

#### MISCELLANEOUS FACTS:

- *King John* was most likely finished in 1596, the year after Shakespeare's son Hamnet died. Many critics believe that scenes of Constance's grief over her son Arthur are reflective of this.
- Shakespeare compresses King John's 17-year reign (1199-1216) into one play. Traditionally, King John is recognized as the primary enemy of Robin Hood, and is historically significant for signing the Magna Carta (which implemented legal restrictions on the will of the monarchy) – elements that are not included in Shakespeare's play.
- Though considered a History play, *King John* takes place 5 generations (at least 160 years) before Shakespeare's more recognized History tetralogies which begin with *Richard II*.
- Shakespeare's source materials for *King John* include Holinshed's *Chronicles*, as well as a historical play called *The Troublesome Reign of King John* (whose authorship is disputed, but sometimes also attributed to Shakespeare).
- Although *King John* is rarely staged today, it is particularly adaptable to various historical and/or political climates. For example, the play was rewritten by Colley Cibber in the 18<sup>th</sup> century amidst anti-Catholic as *Papal Tyranny in the Reign of King John*.
- John was the youngest of five sons of King Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine: William (who died at age 2), Henry, Richard the Lionheart, Geoffrey, and John. The family tensions of this royal family are fictionalized in James Goldman's play *The Lion in Winter*.
- John had previously staged an unsuccessful rebellion against his brother King Richard the Lionheart. Indicative of his ineptitude, King John's historical nicknames were "Lackland" and "Softsword".
- King John was crowned in 1199 after his brother, King Richard I (Richard the Lionheart), died from a gangrenous arrow wound and bequeathed to John all his territories. However, John was only recognized as king by certain territories – both John and Arthur could lay claim to the throne since strict laws of succession would not be implemented in Britain for another 500 years.
- Prince Henry's mother was Isabella of Angouleme (John's second wife, and who bore him five children). Henry was born in 1207 and inherited the crown at John's death in 1216 when he was only 9 years old – he was England's first child king in over 200 years.



Brian Reddy (Cardinal Pandulph) and Andrew Weems (King John) in the 2003 STNJ production of *King John*. ©Gerry Goodstein.