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A Critical Comment on Shakespeare's *Life and Death of King John*

P.S.R.Ch.L.V. Prasad

Introduction



King John 1166-1216

<http://www.medieval-life-and-times.info/medieval-kings/king-john-biography.htm>

King John begins with King Richard the First being killed by a man called Austria. King Richard's youngest brother ascends to the throne as per King Richard's will but Constance, the widow of King Richard's other brother Geoffrey believes the crown should have gone to her teenage son Arthur. Not letting the issue rest, Constance seeks the help of King Phillip of France

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to replace King John with Arthur as King of England. Phillip, the illegitimate son of King Richard I and called the "Bastard" throughout this play, also makes a claim for the throne, but is generally ignored by Arthur and John. Phillip bears an uncanny resemblance to the late King Richard I.

We learn that Austria is helping the French with Phillip's son, The Dauphin (Prince Lewis) also is siding against the English. A battle ensues between the English and French armies to prove to Hubert, the ruler of Algiers who truly holds the English crown. Hubert suggests that the Dauphin marry the daughter (Blanch) of the late King Richard I, thereby settling the dispute by uniting the two nations in marriage. The dowry is to be peace between the two rulers and some English land. Arthur is made Earl of Richmond and Duke of Britain.

Constance is far from satisfied. Even the Bastard feels Hubert's plan will only end in disaster. Constance agrees to this assessment since the deal robs Arthur of ever holding the crown.

This Shakespearean English history play is in praise of King John. Here he is shown in a better light as the first English monarch to oppose the Pope. For Bale, John was a proto-Protestant hero, although in the end he had to accept the papal demands.

An Autocrat Author of Democratic Rights

In modern times, the most important event in John's life is often thought to be his 'signing' of *Magna Carta* in 1215, which Americans especially seem to consider as the first bill of democratic rights. John here is seen as an autocrat brought to his knees by the forces of democracy represented by the (in fact very undemocratic) barons.

Probably, none of these three portraits of John is very close to historical reality! It is not easy to know why Shakespeare chose to make John the subject of what may well be his first play, his only English history play not part of the two tetralogies. There can be no other play by him so little written about. Critics skate round it, compare it unfavorably with other works, treat it as a mere rewriting of an earlier play. Yet it continues to attract considerable attention in the theater, being often acted.

Many Conflicts

In *King John* there are many conflicts of power, both private and public, but none of them is a clear-cut conflict between right and wrong, as in the story of Robin Hood. Shakespeare's John is no Machiavellian villain skillfully taking advantage of every situation for his own ends. One reason why *King John* is such a tantalizing play is that it constantly slips away from all our frames of reference. *King John* offers a most peculiar choice of episodes from the chronicles, and uses a very condensed time-scheme, so that events separated by several years are brought together, the most notable example being the news of the deaths of Constance and Eleanor (IV.ii), three years united in a single speech! The period's barons' revolts all seem to be explained

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as effects of the death of Arthur. There is no mention of Magna Carta, or of the papal Interdict on England.

History is not the Actual Focus! Where Lies the Central Focus?

This all certainly suggests that Shakespeare was not much interested in dramatizing details of 13th century history! At the same time, there is little or no development of 'character' in the play. We have virtually no moment where someone hesitates, trying to analyze their own motives or emotions. It is never possible to see John in conflict with himself, for example. He is no Macbeth, not even Richard III! Why, then, did Shakespeare write it at all? Where does the central focus of the play lie?

It seems that we should look for some kind of dominating political or philosophical theme, as modern producers usually do, in order to find a unifying element. Critics have often noted that the theme of 'rights' is introduced in the play's very first lines, when Chatillon comes challenging John's right to the throne in the name of France's support for the rights of his nephew Arthur 'so forcibly withheld' (1.18). Shakespeare even changes his historical sources at this point, for in the brief duo between mother and son that follows, when John affirms 'Our strong possession and our right for us' (1.39) Eleanor tells him (and us) that although possession is nine tenths of the law, she too thinks that John is not king of England by legal right. In the chronicles no one seriously questions John's legal right to the English throne. In the play such uncertainties are central.

Right versus Might

In the Arden edition introduction, Honigmann reminds us that the word 'rights' is found in *King John* more often (28 times) than in any other of Shakespeare's plays. He also finds records for the play's use of blood (40), mouth (14), breath (14), arm (27), bosom (10), brow (11) etc (Intr. p.lxii), notes sexual images implying violence and rape, and concludes "The key to the major "imagery of oppression" which we have outlined seems to be the theme of "right versus might" (p.lxiv), and offers as a key to the play's structure the fact that "The story ends when the usurper's vitality has consumed itself, when even his legs fail him, and a child-figure, Arthur resurrected as Prince Henry, triumphs at last in undisputed 'right'" (p.lxv).

Distinct and Exclusive Dramatic Functions of Characters

It is still a gross exaggeration to give John the title 'usurper', as Honigmann does; King John is not Macbeth. And why identify Arthur with Henry? They are utterly different in their dramatic functions. Among his statistics, though, Honigmann fails to note the 20 uses of the word 'faith' which form another very striking record, the next most frequent use being in *Troilus* with only 9. *Richard II* has only 3 uses, the great tragedies virtually none. This large number in *King John* is mainly due to the 12 uses of the word during the confrontation in III.i, when the Papal Legate demands that King Philip of France break his oaths of peace just made to England. The

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word is always used in the sense of 'keep/break faith,' never in its religious sense, and it may be the clue we have been looking for. Honigmann sees Arthur as the key to the play ('The action of the play is held together through Arthur' p. lx n.1) and this leads him to write 'We take IV.i to be the central scene' (p.lx).

The Aborted Blinding Scene

Yet this aborted blinding scene, despite its pathos, is most notable for what does not happen during it! It has no direct effect on the political or military action, which is more affected by false rumours and then by the death of Arthur, which happens in IV.iii, far too early for the key-figure of the play! When we look at the uses of faith, we see how often it is a victim of violence: 'breaks the pate of faith' and 'break faith upon commodity' both occur in the 'Commodity speech' of the Bastard (II.i); in III.i faith 'changes to hollow falsehood', 'dies', 'lives again', 'mounts up', is 'trodden down', then people 'play fast-and-loose' with it, make 'faith an enemy to faith', and in Act V 'discarded faith' is 'welcomed home again', 'mended'.

The Need for Constancy

The best way of integrating these facts, I think, is to see the play as illustrating the need for constancy in a world in which everyone plays fast-and-loose with faith. Arthur is simply a helpless pawn in other people's power-games. By stressing his youth, Shakespeare invites us to see him in passive roles, his only defence is his total innocence, which saves his eyes, but leads to his death, when he fails to realize the height of the wall he jumps from. Meanwhile, the 'real world' goes on its way regardless. In that light the 'central scene' of the play must surely be III.i, in which the action suddenly turns from peace to conflict, in the name of conflicting allegiances to the centers of power represented by the Pope and John.

The Nature of Legitimacy

Behind all that happens in the first Act, looms the question of the nature of legitimacy, of legal rights: do their roots lie in constitutional and legal theory, or in the possession and exercise of power? Eleanor says that John's 'right' to the throne is doubtful, yet he is king. Legally, the younger Faulconbridge could have no claim to the rights of his elder brother, even if it were sure that another man had begotten him, yet he brings his case.

When the judgment comes out in favor of his rights, the 'Bastard' is at once prepared to sacrifice them in favor of bright prospects! Act II transfers the power struggles to Angiers, where the two opposing forces are the royal persons England and France, each with their army, making a claim to rightful possession of the city. Not surprisingly, the city is unable to decide between two claimants of equal power! About to be attacked by the combined armies, it seems, the citizens suddenly, unexpectedly, make a new move, suggesting the diplomatic marriage of Blanche and the Dauphin which is quickly agreed on.

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It is here that we realize that King Philip has been using Arthur, that the French support for his 'rights' was political, opportunistic, not based on any firm moral convictions. When political, national interest (commodity) demands it, France breaks faith with Arthur. The rhetoric of the infuriated Constance at the end of Act II is tragi-comic, powerless to influence political events. France and England have decided on a peace that consolidates John's hold on power, the play seems to be over.

Peace is Shattered

The sudden, unexpected arrival of the Legate Pandulph with his demands in III.i shatters the status quo of peace and harmony, forcing the French to declare war on England, breaking faith, since solemn vows of peace and unity had just been sworn. Violence reappears, thanks to the Church! Faith is broken in the name of Faith.

With the capture of Arthur by John, a new question begins to emerge: will John too break faith with Arthur, as expediency seems to demand (as Pandulph recognizes)? The fragility of the boy-prisoner becomes almost emblematic, and the threat to his eyes is clearly an expression of something more than mere sadism. Yet the question of his right to the throne is never even discussed in the play. What happens between him and Hubert in the blinding scene is a seduction-in-reverse, since Hubert by his decision not to hurt him is breaking faith to John, while the child restores him to his true humanity.

No Great Evil Characters

The play has no great monsters, since not even John is resolutely evil. Indeed, we care so little about John, that his death is little more than a dramatic incident. The whole play has been marked by a series of sudden, unexpected appearances and disappearances. There is no call to be surprized, then, by the totally unannounced introduction of John's son Prince Henry as next king in V.vi, or by the way in which the Bastard becomes actively involved in the national defence, (with rather disastrous consequences), or to object to the sudden final peace mission of Pandulph.

Throughout the play, the text itself has been playing fast-and-loose with the rights of the audience. Our right to know what will happen in the end is a victim of this game.

Now the situation caused by the Papal politics in *King John* is a very evident reflexion of international realities at the time the play was written, when an invasion of England sponsored by nations loyal to Rome was a very real danger. In V.iv, English lords who for the noblest of reasons have gone over to the French (the Pope's!) side learn that the wicked continentals will break faith and kill them if victory is theirs. The island fortress is saved by their return to loyalty, but despite their heroic resistance, the English urgently need a true leader. The end of the play expresses the hope that in Henry at last England has a king who will not simply follow the demands of international political expediency, but be a true English king, surrounded by faithful English lords.

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The Real Enemy: The Foreign Nations

The real enemy in *King John*, as in Shakespeare's England, is not the Pope as such but the foreign nations acting in his name. Almost the whole of Act I of the play is taken up with a debate about the Bastard, and the identity of his dead father; once identified as Richard Coeur de Lion's son, the Bastard is legitimized and enters the circles of power, where he remains present to the very end. Indeed, he becomes more central to the play than John himself! He avenges his dead father, and grows into the play's most reliable character.

The issue of bastardy was a vital one for Queen Elizabeth. The Bull of Pope Pius V, *Regnans in excelsis*, issued in 1570, had denied Elizabeth's legitimacy, and therefore her right to the English throne. Born in 1533 as the child of Henry VIII's second marriage to Anne Boleyn, Elizabeth (with Mary) was declared a bastard in July 1536, two months after her mother's execution and just before the caesarean birth of Edward killed Jane Seymour.

Legitimizing Successions

Less than ten years later, the Third Act of Succession (1546) re-legitimized both daughters by recognizing their right to succeed, a right re-confirmed by Henry VIII's will. Yet when Edward was dying, he named the Lady Jane Grey as the next queen, and Mary and Elizabeth were re-bastardized in June 1553! The 'legitimacy' of Mary depended on the fact that she entered London with an army and was supported by the population; Lady Jane Grey did not live long after that! The other event of the age which has left clear echoes in *King John* is the execution of the Catholic Mary, Queen of Scots in early 1587. The signing of her death warrant by Elizabeth was prompted by rumors that a Spanish army had landed in England and that Mary had escaped from prison. The story of how this warrant then escaped from Elizabeth's control and was used without her knowledge clearly underlies John's initial response to the (false) report of Arthur's death. In 1588, the Armada concretized all these fears, and certainly made it clear that the nation was under threat from foreign powers for reasons that had only superficial links with religion and legal right.

The Idealism of Loyalty

To be loyal, then, was a perfect ideal, only the question was bound to arise as to whom one should be loyal to, and why. Birth rights? Possession? Papal decree? National law? Pragmatic consideration? By the time Shakespeare began to write *King John*, another aspect of the question was arising. Elizabeth was getting old, and was without a clear heir. When she died, what would be the criteria for deciding on the legitimacy, the right, of any claimant or claimants?

Where would loyal Englishmen be asked to give their faith? How should they decide? Whose was the power over England? Royal absolutism never had a chance in England, in such circumstances, since it was so clear that what made the sovereign was the English people's

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consent! Even Bloody Mary had to learn that she could only govern if Parliament passed her laws.

Characters in the Drama

KING JOHN

Prince Henry, son to the king.

ARTHUR, Duke Of Britaine, Nephew To The King.

THE EARL OF PEMBROKE.

THE EARL OF ESSEX.

THE EARL OF SALISBURY.

THE LORD BIGOT.

HUBERT DE BURGH.

ROBERT FAULCONBRIDGE, Son To Sir Robert Falconbridge.

PHILIP THE BASTARD, His Half-Brother.

JAMES GURNET, Servant To Lady Falconbridge.

PETER OF POMPRET, A Prophet.

PHILIP, King Of France.

LEWIS, The Dauphin.

LYMOGES, Duke Of Austria.

CARDINAL PANDULPH, The Pope's Legate.

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MELUN, A French Lord.

CHATILLON, Ambassador From France.

QUEEN ELINOR, Mother To King John.

CONSTANCE, Mother To Arthur.

BLANCH OF SPAIN, Niece To King John.

LADY FAULCONBRIDGE.

Lords, Ladies, Citizens Of Angiers, Sheriff,
Heralds, officers, soldiers, messengers, and
Other attendants.

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