

A Dramaturg's Musings on *King John*

By Heather Helinsky

King *John* once reigned among actors and audiences as a play that inspired towering performances. The play begins in the middle of a family meeting with John, his mother Queen Eleanor, and an ambassador from France. We learn quickly that Constance, the widowed mother of Prince Arthur, has turned to the King of France claiming her son's divine right to rule England in place of John.

Family meetings often portend family drama. Though the French envoy warns that his King will fight to install Arthur to rule England, King John responds:

"Here have we war for war,
and blood for blood,
Controlment for controlment—
so answer France."

Once Shakespeare squares that plot away, John mentions—in almost an offhanded way—that the war will be paid for by the church clergy, laying the groundwork for a more complicated historical plot in King John's reign involving the Pope (no spoilers here).

What follows is a baffling scene: a younger brother claims that he deserves his father's inheritance because, on his deathbed, his father told him that his elder brother Philip is a bastard. Queen Eleanor notices Philip's resemblance to her older son—the deceased King Richard the Lion-hearted—John's predecessor to the throne. The Queen urges Philip to forget his claim and join her in battle. More family drama!

Before the Bastard joins his new family and goes off to war, he gets a long scene and soliloquy not just defending illegitimate children, but also celebrating his fortune.

It troubles many scholars, critics, and actors that the title character, King John, barely has a moment onstage alone while his nephew has soliloquies and asides like Hamlet. Why would a playwright give major speeches to this character when the historical King John had such an action-packed, fascinating, violent reign—a reign that could easily provide fodder for several plays?

There's another clear pattern that

emerges in the play. As the King of France and King John battle over Constance's claim that her son is the rightful ruler of England, the elements of fire and water become central to their arguments. It could be for a simple, scenic reason—France and England are separated by a large body of water. King John asserts England's political independence from France's interference:



"This tragedy is one amongst Shakespeare's dramas, which requires, in representation, such eminent powers of acting, that it is scarcely brought upon the stage, but when a theatre has to boast of performers highly gifted in their art."

— Elizabeth Inchbald, actress and playwright, 1808

France, hast thou yet more blood to cast away?
Say, shall the current of our right run on?
Whose passage, vex'd with thy impediment,
Shall leave his native channel and o'erswell
With course disturb'd even thy confining shores,
Unless thou let his silver water keep
A peaceful process to the ocean.

Conversely, the Bastard, from his vantage point, speaks of fire when realizing these watery words of kings will lead to war:

"Ha, Majesty! How high thy glory tow'rs
When the rich blood of kings is set on fire!"

Imagery of nature contrasts political views. These plays were meant to be performed for a class-stratified audience of varying levels of education, from the groundlings to the emerging merchant class to the court nobility. As the arguments between King Philip of France, King John,

and Constance continue, more images of fire and water, land and sea, and wind and earth help these royals make their case for the divine right to rule England.

Still, this play does not fit neatly into the box that early critics wanted it in—asserting that all good plays followed the rules of Aristotle's *Poetics*¹. Shakespeare notoriously crams 17 years of King John's reign into one play's plot. Alexander Pope famously degraded and banished large passages of the play to the margins of his 1725 Shakespeare edition deeming *King John* not worthy of genius.

King John was once revered as a play that every great actor and actress wanted to master. And audiences loved them for it. One group of literary ladies from the late 1700s known as "the Bluestockings" raved after seeing *King John*: "Shakespeare seems to have had the art of the Dervish in the Arabian tales, who could throw his soul into the body of another man, and be at once possessed of his sentiments, adopt his passions, and rise to all the functions and feelings of his situations."

While we may not be as familiar with this play today, *King John* certainly stirred 18th and 19th century audiences, evidenced by letters and diaries

whose authors swooned over the players.

When Jane Austen stayed in London to proofread *Sense and Sensibility*, her first wish upon arrival was to see *King John* at Covent Garden, but the performance was canceled and changed to *Hamlet* at the last minute. Austen voiced her disappointment in missing actress Sarah Siddons' acclaimed portrayal of Constance: "I should particularly have liked seeing her in Constance, and could swear at her with little effort for disappointing me."

Austen and her contemporaries wanted to see *King John* not only for Siddons' star turn as a grieving mother. Siddons also delivered an unprecedented level of seriousness and brought social respectability to her acting. In *King John*, Constance exits the play in Act III, yet Siddons did not treat her role like a minor part of the plot. "Whenever I was called upon to personate the character of Constance, I

never, from the beginning of the play to the end of my part in it, once suffered my dressing room door to be closed, in order that my attention might be constantly fixed on those distressing events which, by this means, I could plainly hear going upon the stage, the terrible effects of which progress were to be represented by me.”

In the 1800s, it was unusual for an actor to stay in character while waiting for an entrance. Often, actors would stand to the side of the stage, bored, in full view of the audience, waiting for their grand entrance. Siddons took what many would consider a flaw of the play—the brief appearance of a strong female role—and used it to her advantage, mesmerizing her fans and advancing the development of the art.

While charismatic performers of the 18th and 19th Century kept *King John* in the repertoire, it became a less produced play after World War I. The harshness of modern warfare turned the audience off to the plays that the Romantics adored. Actors like Laurence Olivier and John Gielgud found *Henry V*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear* better vehicles to speak to their generation; *King John* was left behind. By 1987, theatre historian J.C. Trewin put a call out for *King John* revivals, “since when allowed to speak for itself, *King John* has often been an exciting night.”

Revisiting the play, I can’t agree more with Trewin. And what could be more exciting at PSF than to have actors Greg Wood and Susan Riley Stevens in the roles of King John and Constance battling over the fate of England?

Wood sees the challenge of playing a title character without a moment on stage alone. “There’s no clear hero in the play. There’s no one to root for. John is the protagonist, but unlike Richard III, Henry V, and Hamlet, he has no soliloquy in which to reveal his inmost thoughts. No way to communicate directly with the audience.”

Stevens revels in the opportunity to make Constance a real, complex, and multi-dimensional person who happens to speak beautiful, expressive verse. “I don’t think in all of Shakespeare there is any more elegant or heartbreaking speech regarding grief than hers as she talks about Arthur’s death,” she says. “I think we all want to know who these larger-than-life monarchs were in their most private moments, and thanks to Shakespeare, we have an extraordinary glimpse of Constance as a woman and mother.”

While Constance historically has been a popular and powerful royal, Wood realizes that King John’s historical reputation is that of a villain because of stories like Robin Hood and Ivanhoe.

“I have to play Shakespeare’s John. Historical facts may help my understanding of certain things, but ultimately I only have what Shakespeare has written.”

The play’s structure is curious, but why should we expect anything else? King John is a brother or uncle with similar DNA to so many other characters in the canon of plays published in the First Folio of 1623. Yet, like our own brothers or uncles, can you expect *King John* to behave like other members of the Folio’s family? So let’s enjoy the uniqueness of *King John* and the opportunity to enrich our expectations of what makes a “Shakespeare play.” ■

Heather Helinsky, dramaturg, also contributed the cover story for this issue. Read more about her on page 8.

¹Aristotle’s *Poetics* are outlined on page 3 in the feature on *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

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