

## William Shakespeare's *King John*

### PLOT

In the thirteenth century, King John Lackland has difficulties as King of England after the death of his elder brother Richard the Lionheart and because Arthur, Richard's son is under his care. Arthur, King John's nephew (Richard the Lionheart's son) is in disagreement with his Bastard brother regarding the lands and the title, which their father has left them. King John solves this dispute by naming the eldest son, who happens to be the Bastard, the rightful inheritor of the lands and name. However Eleanor, King John's mother, is smitten by the Bastard son and offers to take him under her wing and the Bastard relinquishes his title.

Suddenly there is word from King Philip of France, threatens war if John does not step down. Constance, Arthur's mother is pushing her weak, innocent and timid son to be King and has gained support from the French. To satisfy the French, King John surrenders the French provinces, which the Lionheart had held, however, due to King John's recent defiance of the Pope's will, Pandulf, the papal legate from Rome forces France to follow through with the threat of war. Knowing that John will either have Arthur killed or abdicate the throne and become vulnerable to Rome, Pandulf encourages them.

Under pressure John decides to have Arthur killed by his loyal subject Hubert who fails to do so out of guilt and keeps him alive in secret. The nobility loses faith in John when Arthur's death is revealed and join the French. Arthur dies in a fatal wall jump but John is blamed. Powerless and lacking support King John drinks poison and dies. His son Henry is crowned King.

### THEMES AND ISSUES

- The problem of rights of succession and illegitimate rule
- Mothers and Children
- Struggle with the pope and the church as an institution
- Friendship and loyalty
- New versus Old
- Marriage as an appeasement war tactic (role of women)
- War, death and corruption
- Historical context accuracy in literature

## LANGUAGE AND STRUCTURE

- One of the most unhistorical of the History Plays
- The play alerts Elizabethans not just to military and political threats, but also to a changing cosmic worldview, all especially threatening as they arise in Catholic countries.
- Personification characterizes the play
- John as a weak king?
- Play as chronicle
- The contemporary debate about royal legitimacy that surrounded the competing claims to the throne of Queen Elizabeth and Mary, Queen of Scots.
- The lack of battles on stage
- Use of satire

## EXTENDED RESOURCES

<http://www.shakespeare.about.com/cs/teacherguides1/>

This site offers general lesson plans on introducing Shakespeare in the classroom

<http://www.firstworld.ca/shakes/john.html>

This site offers a brief summary of the text

[http://www.northern-broadsides.co.uk/Pages/prev\\_kingjohn.htm](http://www.northern-broadsides.co.uk/Pages/prev_kingjohn.htm)

This site offers a summary and a report on a production of King John. There is also an opportunity to download a teacher's guide.

<http://www.academon.com/lib/paper/14217.html>

This is a site where you can buy term papers but you can use this as a tool in your classroom to evaluate the themes. This particular paper evaluates the portrayal of children in Shakespeare's plays

<http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/kingjohn/index.html>

This is the best site and the most comprehensive tool for learning and understanding this play.

<http://www.shakespearedc.org/pastprod/kjasi1.html>

A site that celebrates the forgotten play and discusses productions

<http://www.theatrehistory.com/british/shakespeare011.html>

Discussion of the chronicle plays

Further Reading:

Walter Cohen, "The Life and Death of King John," *The Norton Shakespeare*, Ed. Stephen Greenblatt. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997. Pg. 1015-1021.

Movies: Robin Hood Prince of Thieves and King Arthur movies

## STUDENT ACTIVITIES

- 1) Working as a class develop a KWL chart to determine what stage you're at
- 2) Working in small groups, choose a production name and perform a scene in the play for evaluation
- 3) As a class discuss the idea of monarchy and the pressure of competing, industrialising countries
- 4) Individually, create your own family tree, then the family tree of King John's lineage.
- 5) In a computer lab, work in pairs, searching for responses to prompting questions on the Internet such as who is Shakespeare? What is the Source for King John? What are some parallels between this play and the events going on at the time?
- 6) Find a production of the play and watch and analyse the similarities and differences between the written text and the dramatic performance. What have they included? What have they left out? Why?
- 7) Working in groups choose one character and create an in depth character sketch of the person. Have a visual representation of your character and a written description. Create also a character box (items that your character would have or use) that encapsulates your particular character. Ex. A queen would have a crown in her box.
- 8) There is a distinct lack of battles on stage a lot of the action occurs off-stage how does this add to the text? Does it hinder the realism? As individuals write a paragraph response.
- 9) The two characters of the Bastard and John are somewhat similar. Compare and contrast these two characters in small groups and present your findings to the class.
- 10) The church plays a rather devious role in this play, reflect on this idea by researching the role of the church during Shakespeare's time and list the general rules and regulations imposed by the church.
- 11) To observe the role of women bring in video clips of other Shakespeare plays such as the *Taming of the Shrew* or *Macbeth* to exemplify the way women exuded "power" during Shakespeare's time. As a class, discuss the positive and negative aspects of this method.
- 12) The notion that a King must be legitimate is obvious but what about the predicament that King John faces. In small groups discuss the importance of being fit to rule and being a legitimate ruler.
- 13) Contribute at least one word to a glossary of terms and at the end of the unit share the terms and definitions.
- 14) In pairs trace the progress of a character. Determine whether the character is dynamic, static, flat or round.
- 15) To clarify iambic pentameter read Dr. Seuss Green eggs and Ham and exemplify the unstressed and stressed syllables. Individually write a 5-line piece in iambic pentameter
- 16) "Ironically, the Shakespeare history with which theatregoers may be the least familiar is one whose characters are well known from legend, rhymes, novels, television, and films. This is "the bad King John" whom Robin Hood and his Merry Men fought against and hid from in Sherwood Forest, the John famous to many from the A. A. Milne nursery rhyme:

King John was not a good man:  
He had his little ways

And sometimes no-one spoke to him  
For days and days and days.”

Brainstorm previous stories and discover more well known instances of King John.

<http://www.shakespearedc.org/pastprod/kjasi1.html>

17) “*King John* is full of incidents that are the stuff of today's headlines and culture: a paternity case that, without the benefit of DNA testing, relies on the comparison of external attributes; politicians describing assassinations as if they were discussing a game of chess; child torture and questions surrounding the death of a child (an accident? a murder? a suicide?); women struggling to be players and to make their voices heard in a patriarchal society; church scandal--in this case murder in an abbey; and, perhaps most telling of all, the parsing of words in the search for truth: Robert Faulconbridge's cut and dried "truth is truth" proving not so simple and clear cut after all.” Find events in current day news, which can relate to Shakespeare's play.

<http://www.shakespearedc.org/pastprod/kjasi1.html>

18) Individually choose a quote you find interesting, thought provoking or entertaining and write it on the board. A “Shakespeare wall” is created where you can read your peers' favorite moments.

19) King Arthur is in a difficult position when he must decide to either abdicate the throne or kill Arthur. In a response journal write your own response to the situation.

20) In a debate format, discuss whether or not King John was a good king and did NOT deserve to die or whether he was a bad king and deserved to be killed.

21) As a class discuss whether or not it was acceptable that a monk poisoned the King. Do we attach higher morals to church representatives? If so, are we then disgusted with the monk, or proud of him for saving the people? After the discussion have students write an individual response journal.

22) In small groups discuss the role of women in the play. Why are some women represented and others are not? (Arthur's mother and King John's wife?)

23) As a final project choose a scene and modernize the scene in terms of costumes, setting, language and maybe even a slight twist on the plot. After writing a 'script' perform your version to the class.