

King John

INTRODUCTION

A PLAY called *The Troublesome Reign of John, King of England*, published anonymously in 1591, has sometimes been thought to be a derivative version of Shakespeare's *King John*, first published in the 1623 Folio; more probably Shakespeare wrote his play in 1595 or 1596, using *The Troublesome Reign*±itself based on Holinshed's *Chronicles* and John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* (1563)±as his principal source. Like *Richard II*, *King John* is written entirely in verse.

King John (c.1167±1216) was famous as the opponent of papal tyranny, and *The Troublesome Reign* is a violently anti-Catholic play; but Shakespeare is more moderate. He portrays selected events from John's reign±like *The Troublesome Reign*, making no mention of Magna Carta±and ends with John's death, but John is not so dominant a figure in his play as Richard II or Richard III in theirs. Indeed, the longest±and liveliest±role is that of Richard Coeur-de-lion's illegitimate son, Philip Falconbridge, the Bastard.

King John's reign was troublesome initially because of his weak claim to his brother Richard Coeur-de-lion's throne. Prince Arthur, son of John's elder brother Geoffrey, had no less strong a claim, which is upheld by his mother, Constance, and by King Philip of France. The waste and futility of the consequent war between power-hungry leaders is satirically demonstrated in the dispute over the French town of Angers, which is resolved by a marriage between John's niece, Lady Blanche of Spain, and Louis, the French Dauphin. The moral is strikingly drawn by the Bastard±the man best fitted to be king, but debarred by accident of birth±in his speech (2.1.562±99) on 'commodity' (self-interest). King Philip breaks his treaty with England, and in the ensuing battle Prince Arthur is captured. He becomes the play's touchstone of humanity as he persuades John's agent, Hubert, to disobey John's orders to blind him, only to kill himself while trying to escape. John's noblemen, thinking the King responsible for the boy's death, defect to the French, but return to their allegiance on learning that

the Dauphin intends to kill them after conquering England. John dies, poisoned by a monk; the play ends with the reunited noblemen swearing allegiance to John's son, the young Henry III, and with the Bastard's boast that

This England never did, nor never shall,
Lie at the proud foot of a conqueror,
But when it first did help to wound itself.

Twentieth-century revivals of *King John* have been infrequent, but it was popular in the nineteenth century, when the roles of the King, the Bastard, and Constance all appealed to successful actors; a production of 1823 at Covent Garden inaugurated a trend for historically accurate settings and costumes which led to a number of spectacular revivals.