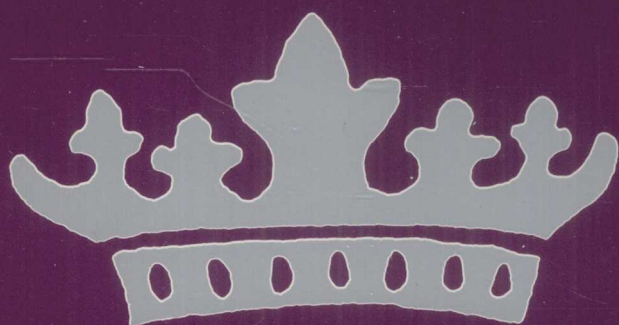


# *KING JOHN*

## New Perspectives



EDITED BY

Deborah T. Curren-Aquino

# *KING JOHN*

## New Perspectives

EDITED BY

Deborah T. Curren-Aquino



DELAWARE

Newark: University of Delaware Press  
London and Toronto: Associated University Presses

© 1989 by Associated University Presses, Inc.

All rights reserved. Authorization to photocopy items for internal or personal use, or the internal or personal use of specific clients, is granted by the copyright owner, provided that a base fee of \$10.00, plus eight cents per page, per copy is paid directly to the Copyright Clearance Center, 27 Congress Street, Salem, Massachusetts 01970.  
[0-87413-337-8/88 \$10.00 + 8¢ pp, pc.]

Associated University Presses  
440 Forsgate Drive  
Cranbury, NJ 08512

Associated University Presses  
25 Sicilian Avenue  
London WC1A 2QH, England

Associated University Presses  
P.O. Box 488, Port Credit  
Mississauga, Ontario  
Canada L5G 4M2

#### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

King John : new perspectives.

Bibliography: p.  
Includes index.

1. Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616. King John.
2. John, King of England, 1167-1216, in fiction, drama, poetry, etc. I. Curren-Aquino, Deborah T., 1949- .  
PR2818.K56 1988 822.3'3 87-40529  
ISBN 0-87413-337-8 (alk. paper)

The paper used in this publication meets the requirements  
of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper  
for Printed Library Materials Z39.48-1984.

*Printed in the United States of America*

**To the  
Shakespeare Association of America**

Mad world, mad kings, mad composition!

War, war, no peace! Peace is to me a war.

The Lady Constance speaks not from her faith,  
But from her need.

I am amaz'd, methinks, and lose my way  
Among the thorns and dangers of this world.

What surety of the world, what hope, what stay,  
When this was now a king, and now is clay?

Shakespeare, *King John*

*KING JOHN*

New Perspectives



# Contents

Preface	9
Introduction: <i>King John</i> Resurgent DEBORAH T. CURREN-AQUINO	11
1 The Historiographic Methodology of <i>King John</i> MARSHA ROBINSON	29
2 <i>King John</i> and <i>The Troublesome Raigne</i> : A Reexamination GUY HAMEL	41
3 <i>King John</i> : A Study in Subversion and Containment VIRGINIA M. VAUGHAN	62
4 Patriarchal History and Female Subversion in <i>King John</i> PHYLLIS RACKIN	76
5 The King's One Body: Unceremonial Kingship in <i>King John</i> BARBARA H. TRAISTER	91
6 "So Jest with Heaven": Deity in <i>King John</i> DOROTHEA KEHLER	99
7 Blots, Stains, and Adulteries: The Impurities in <i>King John</i> JOSEPH CANDIDO	114
8 The Four Voices of the Bastard MICHAEL MANHEIM	126
9 Fraternal Pragmatics: Speech Acts of John and the Bastard JOSEPH A. PORTER	136
10 Constance: A Theatrical Trinity CAROL J. CARLISLE	144
11 Staging <i>King John</i> : A Director's Observations EDWARD S. BRUBAKER	165
12 The "Un-end" of <i>King John</i> : Shakespeare's Demystification of Closure LARRY S. CHAMPION	173



<i>King John</i> : Select Performance History	186
<i>King John</i> : Select Bibliography	193
Contributors	197
Index	201

## Preface

THE TWELVE ESSAYS IN THIS VOLUME ARE THE RESULT OF TWO SEMINARS on *King John* which I chaired at the annual conference of the Shakespeare Association of America in Montreal on 28 and 29 March 1986. Eight of the essays are revised versions of papers originally presented in Montreal; the remaining four are new contributions by several of those who served in the capacity of respondent.

I wish to thank the entire group of seminar participants (twenty-three in all) for their generous giving of intellect, energy, and tactful cooperation, all of which made for two days of intense and spirited discussion. I would also like to thank *Theatre Journal* for permission to reprint sections of Phyllis Rackin's essay which appeared in volume 37 of that publication. The dedication of the present anthology provides a way of thanking the Shakespeare Association of America for approving the original seminar proposal on *King John*, without which this volume would never have been realized. I would be remiss if I did not specifically acknowledge Ann Jennalie Cook, the former executive secretary of the association, whose advice and never-flagging patience and gracious manner were an answer to a prayer in the course of planning and running the seminars. Special thanks must be given to Eileen Soria for the meticulous attention she gave to the typing of the manuscript. All writers and editors should be so fortunate as to have one of her caliber by their side. I am equally indebted to Beth Gianfagna and Ann Harvey of Associated University Presses for their editorial expertise in seeing the manuscript through publication. The support and encouragement of Barbara Mowat, Chairman of the Folger Institute, and my mentors, E. Catherine Dunn and Rev. William J. Rooney, will always be appreciated. I am also grateful to the Richard N. Foley Faculty Research Fund at The Catholic University of America, which was of enormous help during the seminar stage of this project. I would like to remember my father, Robert, who was with me when this volume was first envisioned, and my mother, Adelaide, who has been with me to see it to completion. The greatest but least adequate "thank you" goes to my husband John for his sharp eye, good ear, relentless questions, thoughtful observations, and good humor in making *King John* part of our daily marital concord. His many ways of assistance could never be trivialized by a number.



# Introduction

## *King John* Resurgent

DEBORAH T. CURREN-AQUINO

Yet Fame, nor Favour ever deign'd to say  
*King John* was station'd as a first-rate play.

IN THE FIRST FOLIO, HEMINGE AND CONDELL PLACED *THE LIFE AND Death of King John* first among the history plays, presumably because of the chronological ordering of the kingly reigns being dramatized. It has not been first since, either in the study or on the stage. The lines from Cibber's prologue to his adaptation *Papal Tyranny* (first performed in 1744) that are quoted above have over the centuries proved to be the general opinion. In fact, as one of Shakespeare's most neglected works, *King John* could well be labeled "the forgotten history play." Called a "curst" piece by an anonymous writer to Cibber,<sup>1</sup> it was for Edward Dowden a drama with little to strengthen or gladden the heart.<sup>2</sup> Described as "comparatively tentative" and "strangely faltering,"<sup>3</sup> *King John* has been criticized for lack of unity and telic design,<sup>4</sup> episodic and faulty plot structure,<sup>5</sup> absence of both a clearly defined protagonist and a governing central theme,<sup>6</sup> inconsistency of style,<sup>7</sup> rejection of "cosmic lore,"<sup>8</sup> flat characterization and "ethical muddles,"<sup>9</sup> and egregious failure to allude to Magna Charta.<sup>10</sup> Often its "defects" have been justified by focusing on *The Troublesome Raigne*, the anonymous play generally regarded as Shakespeare's major source. *King John*, so the argument goes, is not top-drawer Shakespeare because he was only doctoring someone else's play at the request of his acting company. M. M. Reese and Robert Ornstein attribute its failings—what E. K. Chambers calls "hack work"—to Shakespeare's boredom with the assignment.<sup>11</sup> When not dismissed or given short shrift,<sup>12</sup> the play is either reluctantly tolerated as an experimental "bridge" connecting the two tetralogies or damningly

praised with the excessive qualification of one who "doth protest too much."<sup>13</sup>

As late as 1960, James Calderwood, in his influential thematic study of the play's preoccupation with honor and commodity, observed that the attention paid to *King John* was limited, for the most part, to questions of source, with little attempt to study the play for its own artistic merit.<sup>14</sup> Seventeen years later, Emrys Jones echoed Calderwood's concern when he wrote:

*King John* is still misunderstood and absurdly underrated. Criticism has failed to clarify its real character, its tone, its vision. Indeed, of all Shakespeare's early plays this is the one that has receded furthest from us, so that a special effort is needed to recover it. We need to see it afresh, facing its oddities in the hope that, rightly understood in the context of the plays as a whole, they will assume an expressive value.<sup>15</sup>

Year after year the Modern Language Association and *Shakespeare Quarterly* annual bibliographies have shown little if any research being done on the play, and professional productions have been far and few between in our century.<sup>16</sup> To adapt Pope's comment in the *Dunciad* on Cibber's *Papal Tyranny*, it seemed as though *King John* "in silence" would "modestly expire."

Time, however, may have finally caught up with Shakespeare's *King John*. The present volume is intended as a contribution to the recovery effort called for by Jones in a context that bodes well for a resurgent *John*. The last few years have witnessed a number of penetrating critical essays dealing with questions of genre, structure, dramatic technique, language, historical process, and performance history (see the Select Bibliography). The annual *Shakespeare Quarterly Bibliography* for 1984 represented a banner year for *King John* scholarship, listing ten entries under criticism alone—admittedly not much if one's standard is *Hamlet* or *King Lear*, but definitely a far cry from the years not so long ago when the average number of critical essays ranged between one and three. Recently Frances Shirley edited a collection of influential criticism on the play, and A. R. Braunmuller has completed his Oxford *King John*; waiting in the wings are the editions of L. A. Beaurline (Cambridge) and Joseph Candido and Charles Forker (MLA Variorum), along with the forthcoming Garland annotated bibliography—all of which should provide the necessary scholarly, critical, and textual apparatus needed for a vital recovery. The 1985 Ashland production marked the fourth time the Oregon Shakespearean Festival (founded in 1935) staged the play; there was also a production in the same year in Berlin at the Theater im Palast; and the BBC version that aired in the United States in 1985 (a production that for better or

worse will be with us forever given its availability on videotape) brought *King John* to the general populace. Finally, when the seminar that gave rise to this volume was first proposed to the Shakespeare Association of America, it proved so popular that two sessions were needed.

If for no other reason than the way in which its characters, situations, and speeches provide a virtual mother lode for Shakespeare's major tragedies,<sup>17</sup> *King John* merits critical attention. A far more compelling reason, however, lies in its profoundly prophetic affinity with the temper and theater of our time. Adrien Bonjour's 1951 essay on the structure of the play may well have been the catalyst in getting *King John* scholarship on the right track—the literary study of the play itself—but the essay that has proved seminal in temperament for this anthology, contextualizing it in ways both tacit and overt, is "*King John: The Ordering of This Present Time*," in which Sigurd Burckhardt makes the stirring claim that "when he wrote *King John*, or quite possibly in writing it, Shakespeare was or became a 'modern.'"<sup>18</sup> (The frequency with which this essay is cited by the contributors to the volume is noteworthy in itself.)

With its "savage irony" and "continual trampling of objective meaning in a stampede of paradox and oxymoron,"<sup>19</sup> *King John* is a most fitting play for a century that has suffered through two world wars; witnessed a holocaust that raised disturbing questions about the human creation supposedly only a "little lower than the angels"; seen the heroic, the absolute, and the certain give way to the pragmatic, the relative, and the contingent; and come to the grim realization after Korea, Vietnam, Watergate, and the Iran-Contra affair that national leaders are not superhuman but plagued with human frailty and all too capable of error, whether moral, political, or military. The vacillation of the English lords and political figures like John and Philip of France is no enigma to modern man; neither is the lack of "cosmic lore" which points to a world that pays homage to the immanent rather than the transcendent; nor is the Bastard's "Commodity" speech, articulating an age marked by "indifferency, / From all direction, purpose, course, intent" (2.1.579–80). Remarkably familiar are the isolation and alienation experienced by Faulconbridge who, through his baseness, is alone and cut off from legitimate family bonds; the casuistry and Orwellian "double-speak" of Pandolph in his encounters with King Philip and the Dolphin; and the Bastard's public relations campaign in the final scene. Faulconbridge's abrupt shifting of gears from a moral response upon the discovery of Arthur's body to the pragmatic "I'll to the King" (4.3.157) is chilling but not shocking to a world grown accustomed to the separation of ethics and politics. A

play that "probes rather than pronounces,"<sup>20</sup> with characters who feel lost, confused, "whirl[ed] asunder and dismember[ed]" (3.1.330), speaks cogently to a time in which the traditional commonplace of nurturing mother earth has given way to the cold, mechanical image of spaceship earth, an image that captures with frightening precision the flux and aimless drifting of modern man. The auditioning of the kings before the citizens of Angiers to determine the legitimate King of England, the absurd strategy (agreed upon by warring factions) to sack the city before deciding who will be its king, the human ineffectuality of Hubert who can neither kill nor, judging from the lords' verdict, not kill Arthur, and the death of John who shrivels up and dies with a whimper and not a bang—all make the play very much at home in a century that has known existentialism and the absurd, and moved from the order of new criticism to the indeterminacy of deconstruction.

The two most striking registers of the play's "modernness" are found in the iteration of incredulity and the dizzying, chaotic speed with which events occur and reversals take place. Where the interrogative governs *Hamlet*, the imperative *King Lear*, and the hyperbolic *Antony and Cleopatra*,<sup>21</sup> a sense of disbelief and amazement reverberates throughout the world of *King John*.<sup>22</sup> John's reaction to the "madcap" Faulconbridge and Lady Faulconbridge's dismay at her son's behavior in the first scene present amazement in relatively light-hearted fashion. But as the action moves along, the incredulity becomes decidedly darker: e.g., Constance's "It is not so. . . . It cannot be. . . . I do not believe" (3.1.4, 6, 9) when she hears of the wedding of Lewis and Blanch, King Philip's "I am perplex'd, and know not what to say" (3.1.221) when Pandulph spins his web of rhetorical equivocation, Hubert's troubled "My lord?" (3.3.66) when John gives his cryptic order for Arthur's death, John's "Bear with me, cousin, for I was amaz'd" (4.2.137) and his questioning of the prophetic five moons (4.2.185), the Bastard's litany of "ifs" (4.3.59, 96, 118, 124, 125, 127) when he discovers Arthur's body, his exclamation "O inglorious league!" (5.1.65) when he learns of John's submission to Rome, and Salisbury's response "May this be possible? May this be true?" (5.4.21) upon hearing of Lewis's intended treachery. The most poignant cry of disbelief needs no gloss for modern audiences who live with daily incredulity in the face of international terrorism and the threat of nuclear annihilation; it is, of course, the Bastard's "I am amaz'd, methinks, and lose my way / Among the thorns and dangers of this world" (4.3.140–41).

The second index to the play's modern temper, one often bordering on the nightmarish, is the amazing speed with which Shakespeare's

"muse travels lightning-winged, being here, there, and everywhere in the space of a few minutes."<sup>23</sup> As the anonymous writer to Cibber noted in 1745:

One feels before one knows one is to feel! The effect almost precedes the act, at least keeps pace with it. . . . Constance plagues us in this manner, at every entrance. John does the same. He no sooner takes Arthur prisoner, and sends his cousin to England upon business of moment, but, in the very Field of Battle, on the spot, attacks Hubert at once, gives him no time to pause, works him to his bloody purpose, and speeds for England for fresh business.<sup>24</sup>

Inauspicious occurrences come in pairs—John's learning of the invasion of England and his mother's death (4.2.110–24)—or in triplicate—Lewis's hearing that

The Count Melune is slain; the English lords  
By his persuasion are again fall'n off,  
And your supply, which you have wish'd so long,  
Are cast away, and sunk on Goodwin sands.

(5.5.10–13)

In act 2, Chatillion suddenly appears in answer to Constance's wish, and no sooner has he told of John's promised arrival than John himself is on the scene. The French will later take a lesson from John's temporal feat; in act 4, scene 2, when the messenger delivers the news of the invasion, he says to John:

The copy of your speed is learn'd by them;  
For when you should be told they do prepare,  
The tidings comes that they are all arriv'd.

(113–15)

Constance in act 3 curses the nuptials of Blanch and Lewis, and immediately, in answer to her curse, Pandulph enters to excommunicate the English king. It is no wonder that John finally cries "Withhold thy speed, dreadful occasion!" (4.2.125), but to no avail for this is a play in which "the spirit of the time . . . teach[es] . . . speed" (4.2.176). "What's done is done" is not a possibility in the world of *King John* where what is done is undone only to be done again. Arthur living when supposed dead and dead when thought living is paradigmatic of the broken vows, the vacillating political figures, the king who gives up his crown only to be recrowned, and the odds that rapidly shift in and out of one's military favor as they do for both the Bastard and Lewis in the final scenes.



Plans misfire, action is canceled, and “purposes [are] mistook” in an atmosphere of flux, motion, and uncertain process. The dislocation of time, something well known to modern sensibilities and realized in the expressionist, symbolist, and absurdist plays of the twentieth century, creates “a shaping pattern” of “repeated reversals of expectations.”<sup>25</sup>

There are, of course, other affinities with modern drama, affinities presumably recognized by Dürrenmatt in his adaptation of *King John*, by John Arden in his powerful treatment of the same historical period, *Left-Handed Liberty*, and by John Barton in his avant-garde RSC production at Stratford in 1974.<sup>26</sup> Certainly the emphasis on talk and discussion (what Douglas Wixson labels the debate-like structure of the play)<sup>27</sup> calls to mind the works of Shaw—perhaps nowhere more strikingly than in the scene between Lewis and Pandulph, anticipating as it does, the Cauchon-Warwick exchange in *St. Joan*. The pregnant pauses of Pinter do not seem centuries removed from the dialogue between John and Hubert in act 3:

*King John.* Good Hubert, Hubert, Hubert, throw thine eye  
On yon young boy. I'll tell thee what, my friend,  
He is a very serpent in my way,

He lies before me. Dost thou understand me?  
Thou art his keeper.

*Hubert.* And I'll keep him so,  
That he shall not offend your Majesty.

*King John.* Death.

*Hubert.* My lord?

*King John.* A grave.

*Hubert.* He shall not live.

*King John.* Enough.

(3.3.59–66)

Undoubtedly, the scene that hauntingly stays with an audience weaned on the haptic and barren world of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is the night encounter between Hubert and the Bastard on a vague and seemingly timeless plain. As if they are emerging from a nightmare world at best and hell at worst, these two characters, filled with anxiety and uncertainty, haltingly search each other out:

*Hubert.* Who's there? Speak ho! speak quickly, or I shoot.

*Bastard.* A friend. What art thou?

*Hubert.* Of the part of England.

*Bastard.* Whither dost thou go?

*Hubert.* What's that to thee? Why may not I demand

Of thine affairs, as well as thou of mine?