



2022 Study Guide

King John

- John was born 1166, the fifth son of Henry II of England and Eleanor of Aquitaine.
- He was known as John Lackland because he was not expected to inherit significant lands in his lifetime.
- John spent much of his childhood at Fontevraud Abbey, in France, presumably preparing for a life in the church.
- Because he didn't join his brothers in a rebellion against their father, Henry II named a 10-year-old Prince John the Lord of Ireland.
- He loved reading and he built a rather large library, which he carried with him on his travels.
- After his brother, Richard the Lionheart, was named King of England, John led an unsuccessful attempt to seize control of England while Richard was fighting in the Crusades.
- Even though he betrayed King Richard, his brother still named him successor to the crown.
- John was crowned King of England in 1199.
- To pay for wars with France, he heavily taxed the citizens of England.
- In 1209, a disagreement with Pope Innocent III led to his excommunication.
- John granted the original Magna Carta, the first time in English history where limits were applied to a monarch's power.
- John died in 1216, most likely of dysentery, not a secret poisoning.



King John, Google Art Project, Wikimedia Commons

King John

by William Shakespeare



Rosa Joshi, Director of *King John*



William Shakespeare

upstart crow collective

This is Rosa Joshi's fourth time directing for OSF. She directed Shakespeare's *Henry V* in 2018, *As You Like It* in 2019 and *Bring Down the House* in 2020.

Joshi is based in Seattle and works as a director, producer and professor. She is also the co-founder of a theatre in Seattle called the upstart crow collective, a company that produces classical plays with all-female casts.

Joshi is interested in the fact that the wars in *King John* are caused by politicians who do not fight. Rather it is like a game for them, something they watch from afar.

Which characters in the play observe the war? What is the effect of their lack of participation?

Shakespeare

- Born around April 23, 1564.
- Married Anne Hathaway at the age of 18. They had three children between 1583 and 1585.
- Became an actor and playwright for the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which became the King's Men when King James I was crowned in 1603. Wrote 37 plays, 2 epic poems and 154 sonnets over a 25-year career.
- *King John* was written around the mid-1590s.
- Died in his hometown of Stratford-upon-Avon on April 23, 1616.
- Buried in Stratford's Holy Trinity Church.

Before seeing/reading the play

1. What were the history and major events surrounding the life and reign of King John? What were his accomplishments? Describe the relationships between John and his father, mother, and two brothers. What were the significant political conflicts of the time? What was John's reputation amongst his subjects? How has our historical view of him changed over time? These and other websites provide information:

https://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/doc/Jn_HistoricalNotes/section/A%20timeline%20of%20major%20events%20in%20the%20life%20of%20King%20John/index.html
https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/john.shtml
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John,_King_of_England

2. What was the significance of the following historical figures who appear in the play: King Richard I (aka Richard Coeur de Lion), Eleanor of Aquitaine, Constance, Arthur, Blanche, Hubert de Burgh, Philip II of France, Lewis the Dauphin (aka King Louis VIII)? What were the alliances and rifts that existed between them? These and other websites provide information:

<https://www.royal.uk/richard-i>
<https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/histories/women-in-history/eleanor-aquitaine/>
<https://peoplepill.com/people/constance-duchess-of-brittany>
<https://www.historytoday.com/archive/arthur-brittany-captured>
<https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/woman/77.html>
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hubert_de_Burgh,_1st_Earl_of_Kent



https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Philip_II_of_France
[http://www.1066.co.nz/Mosaic%20DVD/whoswho/text/Louis_VIII_of_France\[1\].htm](http://www.1066.co.nz/Mosaic%20DVD/whoswho/text/Louis_VIII_of_France[1].htm)
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_I_of_England

“Be great in act, as you have been in thought.”

—Bastard, Act 5, Scene 1

3. Beginning with the union of King Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine, look at a Plantagenet family tree. This and other websites provide information:
<https://cdn.britannica.com/38/168038-050-C74ED4A7/House-of-Plantagenet.jpg>
4. What were the rules of royal succession in King John's time? How did his father and his brother, Richard, alter the line of succession while they were still alive? What is primogeniture? According to primogeniture, who should have succeeded King Richard after his death? These and other websites provide information:
https://www.worldhistory.org/King_John_of_England/
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Order_of_succession
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_English_and_British_line_of_succession
5. Define the word “bastardy.” What were the social and legal consequences for a child born out of wedlock in the time of King John? What were the consequences for the mothers of children born out of wedlock? These and other websites provide information:
<https://www.pricegen.com/bastardy-or-illegitimacy-in-england/>
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bastard_\(law_of_England_and_Wales\)#:~:text=A%20bastard%20\(also%20historically%20called,of%20his%20or%20her%20birth.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bastard_(law_of_England_and_Wales)#:~:text=A%20bastard%20(also%20historically%20called,of%20his%20or%20her%20birth.)
6. What positions of power could women of nobility possess in the Middle Ages? What gave them power? In what ways did the Church determine their value in society? How did Eleanor of Aquitaine and Blanche de Castile challenge and revolutionize the roles of women at this time? These and other websites provide information:
<https://www.worldhistory.org/article/1345/women-in-the-middle-ages/>
<https://www.medievalwomen.org/blanche-of-castile.html>
<https://www.history.com/topics/british-history/eleanor-of-aquitaine#:~:text=Inheriting%20a%20vast%20estate%20at,the%20courtly%20rituals%20of%20chivalry.>

7. In what ways was marriage a different institution in the Middle Ages among the nobility? Describe the function of arranged marriages. What were the advantages and disadvantages? What was the purpose of the arranged marriage between Prince Lewis and Blanche of Castile? How did this marriage benefit King John and King Phillip? What was the outcome of the union between Lewis and Blanche? In what ways did Blanche continue to use the power gained from her marriage, even after the death of her husband? These and other websites provide information:
<https://www.medievaltimes.com/education/medieval-era/marriage#:~:text=The%20arrangement%20of%20marriage%20was,was%20based%20on%20monetary%20worth.>
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Royal_intermarriage#Medieval_and_Early_Modern_Europe
<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Blanche-of-Castile-wife-of-Louis-VIII>
8. Describe the relationship between King John and the Catholic Church. Who was Stephen Langton, and how did his appointment lead to major conflict between King John and Pope Innocent? What was the role of the Pope in the lives of English people? What is an interdict, and what is excommunication? Describe the impact of the interdict and King John's excommunication on the citizens of England. How did King John make his amends with the Church? These and other websites provide information:
<http://materamabilis.org/ma/subjects/history/introduction-to-british-history-2/our-ladys-dowry/quarrel-with-the-pope-the-church-and-king-john/>
<https://www.medievalists.net/2020/01/when-england-was-under-interdict/>
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen_Langton
9. What is Ascension Day, and why was it significant to Christians of the 13th century? This and other websites provide information:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feast_of_the_Ascension
[https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2019/01/the-ascension-in-anglo-saxon-england.html#:~:text=The%20Ascension%20of%20Christ%20was,1%3A9%2D11\).](https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2019/01/the-ascension-in-anglo-saxon-england.html#:~:text=The%20Ascension%20of%20Christ%20was,1%3A9%2D11).)
10. What was the Magna Carta? For whom and why was it created? Why did John seek to annul the charter. What were the events that led to the First Barons' War? Why were English landowners so frustrated by the rule of King John? These and other websites provide information:
<https://www.bl.uk/magna-carta/videos/what-is-magna-carta>
<https://www.bl.uk/magna-carta>
<https://www.bl.uk/magna-carta/articles/the-origins-of-magna-carta>

After seeing/reading the play

1. Refer to your research on King John and his time. What elements of history does Shakespeare faithfully report in his play? What elements does he fictionalize? What did the writer gain by making these changes? How might the politics of Shakespeare's time have influenced his perspective on King John and his history? One of the most significant moments in King John's reign was the signing of the Magna Carta. Why might Shakespeare have left that out of the play?
2. Refer to your research on royal succession and primogeniture. What claim does young Arthur have to the throne? How does his claim compare with John's? The historical Arthur was 16, but Shakespeare's character is significantly younger. How does the relationship between the two prospects for the throne change because of their difference in age? How might the story be different if Shakespeare was more historically accurate with Arthur's age? What claim does Lewis the Dauphin have to the throne of England?
3. Refer to your research on the role of women, marriage in the Middle Ages, Prince Lewis, and Blanche of Castile. What role does Blanche play in John and Phillip's attempt at peace? The marriage is arranged as a political move, but the language between the betrothed is filled with talk of love. In what ways might love exist between the two? In what ways might love not exist? When France sides with the church and declares war on England, what conflict does Blanche face?



2022 *King John* costume design for King John and Prince Phillip by Melissa Torchia.

4. Refer to your research on children born out of wedlock in the time of King John. While most of the play's characters are based on historical figures, the Bastard is invented. How is he different from the other characters in the play? How do his ideas and attitudes differ from his historical counterparts? Why is he the only character to directly address the audience? How does the direct address make this character different? What role does the audience play in relationship to the Bastard?
5. Eleanor of Aquitaine, Constance, and Lady Falconbridge are all defined by their role as mother to a son. Describe these three mother-son relationships. What do they have in common with each other? How are they different? How do each of these women gain power from the relationships they have with their sons? When do they lose power because of their sons?
6. Refer to your research on the power of the Church during this time. When John defies the Pope, Cardinal Pandulph threatens King John with assassination and threatens King Phillip with excommunication if he sides with England. What does Pandulph demand in exchange for lifting this curse on John? Historically, what power did the church have in the political arena? Why might King John's rebelliousness have pleased Shakespeare's audiences? How does it resonate for audiences in our current political climate?
7. For King John, what are the advantages of keeping Arthur alive? What are the disadvantages? How does he arrive at the conclusion that Arthur should die? What are the consequences for John of ordering Arthur's death—personally and politically?
8. Hubert is loyal to King John, yet he disobeys him when faced with the act of killing young Arthur. King Phillip promises protection to Constance and Arthur, but sides with King John when it serves him and his country. What is the power of an oath in this play? Who makes promises and keeps them? Who makes promises and breaks them? What are the consequences of the broken promises? What are the consequences of promises kept? What does this play say about the virtue of loyalty and the virtue of honor?
9. What options does Constance have, as a widow, for keeping her son safe and fighting for his right to the throne? What choices does she make? What weapons are at her disposal? In what ways is she successful? In what ways is she not?
10. Cardinal Pandulph tries to convince Lewis that he stands to prosper if young Arthur is murdered by King John. Lewis responds, "What shall I gain by another's fall?" In what ways do the characters in this play gain from the downfall of others? In what ways do they lose?
11. Why does the Bastard want war with France, and why is he frustrated with John for making peace with the Church? What does he stand to gain if the two countries engage in battle? Look at his speech in Act II, scene i about commodity. What does he mean by that word, "commodity"? What events have led to this speech? How have these events surprised or disappointed him? According to him, how should society function? According to him, how does society actually function? How does his position in society give him perspective that differs from the characters of royal birth?



2022 *King John* set rendering. Co-designed by Hana Kim and Se Oh.

12. Constance says, "War! War! No Peace! Peace is to me a War." In what ways are the characters of King John struggling between war and peace? Who benefits most from a peace between France and England? Who stands to gain the most if the countries go to war? What are other ways the themes of war and peace echo through this play? In what ways do characters face internal wars within themselves? How does war exist not only between countries but within families or the Church? When, if ever, do characters find true peace within themselves or with others?
13. Why do the nobles, Salisbury and Pembroke, object to John's second coronation? Why are they disturbed by his submission to the Pope? Why do they switch sides to fight with the French? What makes them change their minds in the end to choose Prince Henry as their king instead of Lewis?

The Tales of Robin Hood

For many of us, our knowledge of the historical figures is built on the fictional tales of Robin Hood. Just think of Disney's version of "Prince John, the phony king of England," taxing the poor while his noble brother, King Richard, is off fighting the crusades.

However, in Elizabethan England, Shakespeare's audiences might have seen a hero in a king who would so boldly stand up to the Roman Catholic Church. Explore some of these old tales and see how the characters compare to those in Shakespeare's *King John*.

<https://www.heritage-history.com/index.php?c=read&author=marshall&book=robin&story=live>

14. King John dies of a fever, historically caused by severe dysentery, but it is suggested in the play that he was poisoned by a monk. Based on the interactions in the play between John and members of the Church, might he have been poisoned and why? Whom does it benefit to suggest that the Church has a hand in John's death? Whom does it benefit to maintain that he dies of natural causes? How does the way he dies have an impact on the ending of the play?
15. What are the qualities of a good ruler? In most history plays, Shakespeare deals with the tension between the right to rule and the ability to rule well. What conflict results when the reigning monarch lacks one of these two qualities? How does John measure up or not? Phillip? Lewis? Eleanor? The Bastard?
16. What is revealed about *King John* when it is performed by an all-female and non-binary cast? What do you learn about the traditionally male characters? What is uncovered about the traditionally female characters?
17. If you are seeing *The Tempest*, compare Miranda and Blanche. How are both used as commodities? How does Miranda's relationship with Ferdinand compare to Blanche's relationship with Lewis? How does each woman manage being in a world that is largely run by men?



Top right, King John Signs the Magna Carta, by Edgar Wilson "Bill" Nye, from *Comic History of England*, Wikimedia Commons

Middle, *Robin Hood and Maid Marian*, Wikimedia Commons Archive

Bottom, *Robin Hood and Little John* by Louis Rhead, Wikimedia Commons

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