

**SHAKESPEARE'S KING JOHN, WITH  
EXPLANATORY NOTES AND  
ILLUSTRATIVE NOTES AND NUMEROUS  
EXTRACTS FROM THE HISTORY ON  
WHICH THE PLAY IS FOUNDED**

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Extracts from the History on Which the Play Is Founded by John Hunter

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## PREFACE.

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OF SHAKSPEARE'S historical plays, *King John* is the first in the order of history. It is founded on an older play, first printed in 1591, entitled, 'The Troublesome Raigne of John, King of England, with the Discoverie of King Richard Cordelion's base son, vulgarly named the Bastard Fauconbridge; also the death of King John at Swinstead Abbey.'

Malone has observed that '*King John* is the only one of our poet's uncontested plays that is not entered in the books of the Stationers' Company.' Its name occurs in an enumeration of Shakspeare's plays in the *Palladis Tamia* of Francis Meres, 1598; and, accordingly, the date of its composition must have been somewhere between 1591 and 1598, probably not earlier than 1596, the year assigned by Malone. It was first published in the folio collection of 1623.

We believe that Shakspeare, in composing *King John*, partially consulted 'Holinshed's Chronicle'; but he was mainly guided by the action of the old play, and was thus made to deviate in several instances from authentic history, and to omit--what, perhaps, he would have included, had he made selections for himself from the old chronicler—a

reference to that great event in John's career, the signature of *Magna Charta*. The poet was contented with such incidents as he found in 'The Troublesome Raigne,' because it was, no doubt, a great favourite on the stage; but its faint and imperfect delineations of character were, by his wonderful genius and profound knowledge of human nature, rectified and developed into the most life-like, interesting, and instructive pictures.

## REMARKS OF VARIOUS AUTHORS

ON

# SHAKSPEARE'S 'KING JOHN.'

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'The dramas derived from the English history, ten in number, form one of the most valuable of Shakspeare's works, and partly the fruit of his maturest age. I say advisedly *one* of his works, for the poet evidently intended them to form one great whole. It is, as it were, an historical heroic poem in the dramatic form, of which the separate plays constitute the rhapsodies. The principal features of the events are exhibited with such fidelity: their causes, and even their secret springs, are placed in such a clear light, that we may attain from them a knowledge of history in all its truth, while the living picture makes an impression on the imagination which can never be effaced.

'In *King John* the political and warlike events are dressed out with solemn pomp, for the very reason that they possess but little of true grandeur. The falsehood and selfishness of the monarch speak in the style of a manifesto. Conventional dignity is most indispensable where personal dignity is wanting. The bastard Faulconbridge is the witty interpreter of this language; he ridicules the secret springs of politics without disapproving of them; for he owns that he is endeavouring to make his fortune by similar means, and wishes rather to belong to the deceivers than the deceived, for in his view of the world there is no other choice. His litigation with his brother respecting the succession of his pretended father, by which he effects his acknowledgment at court as natural son of the most chivalrous king of England, Richard Cœur-de-Lion, forms a

very entertaining and original prelude in the play itself. When, amidst so many disguises of real sentiments, and so much insincerity of expression, the poet shows us human nature without a veil, and allows us to take deep views of the inmost recesses of the mind, the impression produced is only the more deep and powerful. The short scenes in which John urges Hubert to put out of the way Arthur, his young rival for the possession of the throne, is superlatively masterly; the cautious criminal hardly ventures to say to himself what he wishes the other to do. The young and amiable prince becomes a sacrifice of unprincipled ambition; his fate excites the warmest sympathy. When Hubert, about to put out his eyes with the hot iron, is softened by his prayers, our compassion would be almost overwhelming, were it not sweetened by the winning innocence of Arthur's childish speeches. Constance's maternal despair on her son's imprisonment is also of the highest beauty; and even the last moments of John—an unjust and feeble prince, whom we can neither respect nor admire—are yet so portrayed as to extinguish our displeasure with him, and fill us with serious considerations on the arbitrary deeds and the inevitable fate of mortals.—SCHLEGEL.

'If *King John*, as a whole, be not entitled to class among the very first-rate compositions of our author, it can yet exhibit some scenes of superlative beauty and effect, and two characters supported with unfailing energy and consistency.

'The bastard Faulconbridge, though not perhaps a very amiable personage, being somewhat too interested and worldly-minded in his conduct to excite much of our esteem, has, notwithstanding, so large a portion of *the very spirit of Plantagenet* in him, so much heroism, gaiety, and fire, in his constitution, and such an open and undaunted turn of mind—that we cannot refuse him our admiration; nor, on account of his fidelity to John, however ill-deserved, our occasional sympathy and attachment. The alacrity and intrepidity of his daring spirit are nobly supported to the very last, where we find him exerting every nerve to rouse and animate the conscience-stricken soul of the tyrant.



'In the person of Lady Constance, *Maternal Grief*, the most interesting passion of the play, is developed in all its strength; the picture penetrates to the inmost heart; and seared must those feelings be which can withstand so powerful an appeal; for all the emotions of the fondest affection and the wildest despair, all the rapid transitions of anguish and approximating frenzy, are wrought up into the scene with a truth of conception which rivals that of nature herself.

'The innocent and beautiful Arthur, rendered doubly attractive by the sweetness of his disposition and the severity of his fate, is thus described by his doting mother:—

'But thou art fair, and at thy birth, dear boy,  
Nature and Fortune joined to make thee great;  
Of Nature's gifts thou may'st with lilies boast,  
And with the half-blown rose.'

When he is captured, therefore, and imprisoned by John, and consequently sealed for destruction, who but Shakspeare could have done justice to the agonising sorrows of the parent? Her invocation to Death, and her address to Pandulph, paint maternal despair with a force which no imagination can augment, and of which the tenderness and pathos have never been exceeded.

'Independent of the scenes which unfold the striking characters of Constance and Faulconbridge, there are two others in the play which may vie with anything that Shakspeare has produced; namely, the scene between John and Hubert, and that between Hubert and Arthur. The former, where the usurper obscurely intimates to Hubert his bloody wishes, is conducted in a manner so masterly, that we behold the dark and turbulent soul of John lying naked before us in all its deformity, and shrinking with fear even from the enunciation of its own vile purposes. "It is one of the scenes," as Mr. Steevens has well observed, "to which may be promised a lasting commendation. Art could add little to its perfection; and time itself can take nothing from its beauties."

'The scene with Hubert and the executioners, where the hapless Arthur supplicates for mercy, almost lacerates the heart

itself; and is only rendered supportable by the tender and alleviating impression which the sweet innocence and artless eloquence of the poor child fix with indelible influence on the mind.

'As for the character of John, which, from its meanness and imbecility, seems not well calculated for dramatic representation, Shakspeare has contrived, towards the close of the drama, to excite in his behalf some degree of interest and commiseration; especially in the dying scene, where the fallen monarch, in answer to the inquiry of his son as to the state of his feelings, mournfully exclaims, "Poisoned,—ill fare;—dead, forsook, cast off!"—DRAKE.

'It is upon the conventional *History* of the stage that Shakspeare built his play. It is impossible now, except on very general principles, to determine why a poet, who had the authentic materials of history before him, and possessed beyond all men the power of moulding those materials, with reference to a dramatic action, into the most complete and beautiful forms, should have subjected himself, in the full vigour and maturity of his intellect, to a general adherence to the course of that conventional dramatic history. But so it is. The King John of Shakspeare is not the King John of the historians, which Shakspeare had unquestionably studied; it is not the King John of his own imagination, casting off the trammels which a rigid adoption of the facts of those historians would have imposed upon him; but it is the King John, in the conduct of the story, in the juxta-position of the characters, and in the catastrophe—in the historical truth, and in the historical error—of the play which preceded him some few years. This, unquestionably, was not an accident. It was not what, in the vulgar sense of the word, is called a plagiarism. It was a submission of his own original powers of seizing upon the feelings and understanding of his audience, to the stronger power of *habit* in the same audience. The history of John had been familiar to them for almost half a century. The familiarity had grown out of the rudest days of the drama, and had been established in the period of its comparative refinement, which

immediately preceded Shakspeare. The old play of *King John* was, in all likelihood, a vigorous graft upon the trunk of an older play, which "occupies an intermediate place between moralities and historical plays,"—that of *Kyngs Johan*, by John Bale, written probably in the reign of Edward VI. Shakspeare, then, had to choose between forty years of stage tradition, and the employment of new materials. He took, upon principle, what he found ready to his hand. But none of the transformations of classical or oriental fable, in which a new life is transfused into an old body, can equal this astonishing example of the life-conferring power of a genius such as Shakspeare's.—KNIGHT.