

**THE PLAYS OF
SHAKESPEARE:
KING JOHN**

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The Plays of Shakespeare: King John by William Shakespeare & George Brandes

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WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE & GEORGE BRANDES

**THE PLAYS OF
SHAKESPEARE:
KING JOHN**

FAVOURITE CLASSICS :
The Plays of Shakespeare.

KING JOHN

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

A Critical Study

By GEORGE BRANDES

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THE PLAYS OF
SHAKESPEARE

KING JOHN

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
GEORGE BRANDES

and a Plate representing Mr. BERBOHM TAKE
as 'King John.'



LONDON
WILLIAM HEINEMANN
1904

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INTRODUCTION.

I.

SHAKESPEARE used as the basis of his *King John* an old play on the same subject published in 1591.¹ This play is quite artless and spiritless, but contains the whole action, outlines all the characters, and suggests almost all the principal scenes. The poet did not require to trouble himself with the invention of external traits. He could concentrate his whole effort upon vitalising, spiritualising, and deepening everything. Thus it happens that this play, though never one of his most popular (it seems to have been but seldom performed during his lifetime, and remained in manuscript until the appearance of the First Folio), nevertheless contains some of his finest character-studies and a multitude of pregnant, imaginative, and exquisitely worded speeches.

The old play was a mere Protestant tendency-drama directed against Catholic aggression, and full of the crude hatred and coarse ridicule of monks and nuns characteristic of the Reformation period. Shakespeare, with his usual tact, has suppressed the religious element, and retained only the national and political attack upon Roman Catholicism, so that the play had no slight actuality for the Elizabethan public. But he has also displaced the centre of gravity of the old play. Everything in Shakespeare turns upon John's defective right

¹ The full title runs thus: 'The Troublesome Raigne of *John*, King of *England*, with the discouerie of King Richard Cordelions Base sonne (vulgarly named The Bastard Fawconbridge): also the death of King John at Swinstead Abbey. As it was (sundry times) publickly acted by the *Queenes Maiesties Players*, in the honorable Citie of London.'

to the throne : therein lies the motive for the atrocity he plans, which leads (although it is not carried out as he intended) to the barons' desertion of his cause.

Despite its great dramatic advantages over *Richard II.*, the play suffers from the same radical weakness, and in an even greater degree : the figure of the King is too unsympathetic to serve as the centre-point of a drama. His despicable infirmity of purpose, which makes him kneel to receive his crown at the hands of the same Papal legate whom he has shortly before defied in blustering terms ; his infamous scheme to assassinate an innocent child, and his repentance when he sees that its supposed execution has alienated the chief supporters of his throne—all this hideous baseness, unredeemed by any higher characteristics, leads the spectator rather to attach his interest to the subordinate characters, and thus the action is frittered away before his eyes. It lacks unity, because the King is powerless to hold it together.

He himself is depicted for all time in the masterly scene (iii. 3) where he seeks, without putting his thought into plain words, to make Hubert understand that he would fain have Arthur murdered :—

' Or if that thou couldst see me without eyes,
Hear me without thine ears, and make reply
Without a tongue, using conceit alone,
Without eyes, ears and harmful sound of words ;
Then, in despite of brooded watchful day,
I would into thy bosom pour my thoughts :
But, ah, I will not ! yet I love thee well.'

Hubert protests his fidelity and devotion. Even if he were to die for the deed, he would execute it for the King's sake. Then John's manner becomes hearty, almost affectionate. ' Good Hubert, Hubert ! ' he says caressingly. He points to Arthur, bidding Hubert