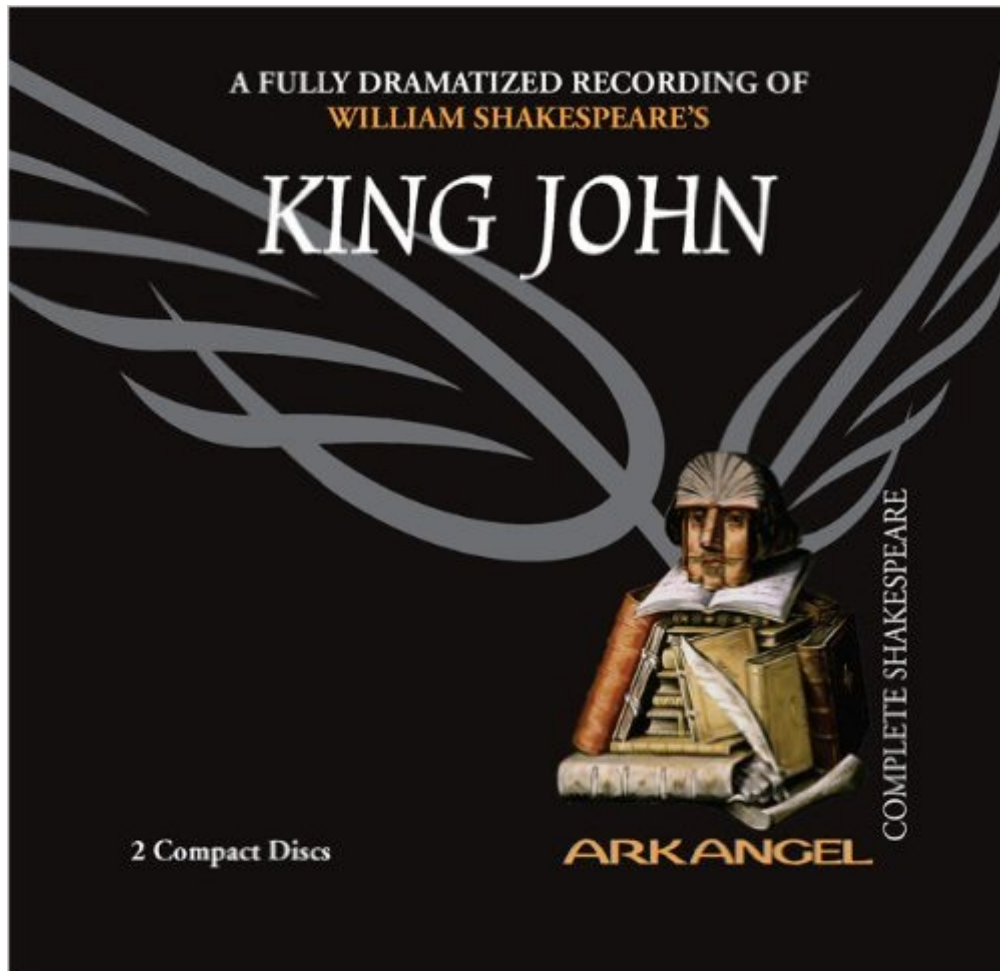


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King John (Arkangel Complete Shakespeare)



Synopsis

[Full-Cast Audio Theater Dramatization. In this early history play, King John is played by Michael Feast, the Bastard by Michael Maloney, and Constance by Eileen Atkins.] King John of England is pitted against the united powers of France, Brittany, Austria, and the Papacy. Will England be destroyed by his fatal indecision? As alliances are made, broken, and remade, the paranoid and erratic John reveals his weakness and reliance on those around him - including his powerful mother Queen Elinor and Faulconbridge, the cynical and witty bastard son of the dead King Richard I.

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Customer Reviews

I was drawn to "King John" because of Claire McEachern, who wrote the introduction. In case you don't know, Ms McEachern is a Shakespeare scholar and professor at UCLA who has written several intros for The Pelican Shakespeare series. Her insight into Prince Hal ("Henry IV, Pt. 1") is the most insightful I have read. It got me reading her other introductions, including this one for "King John." Thanks to her, I read the play, which is rarely performed today, but is in fact first-rate Shakespeare, with a cast of memorable characters, memorable lines, and a page-turner to boot. This is the same King John who was forced into signing the Magna Charta, which Shakespeare left out of the play. Why? Apparently, Queen Elizabeth did not want to be reminded of it, and being politically astute the Bard was not going to be the one to remind her. For the record, King John reigned from 1199 to 1216. As with history, so with Shakespeare's play, King John is not an admirable character. He's a snake, a political expedient who plays Rome to his own advantage, gets fearless Richard Plantagenet (a.k.a. "the Bastard") to lead his army, and who is not above

having his rivals for the throne put to death. The play revolves around young Arthur, rightful heir to the throne that John has so ignobly usurped. King Philip of France supports Arthur's claim and threatens an invasion. John invades France first and the result is a comedy of errors revolving around both armies and the town of Angiers in France. The looming battle is resolved by the marriage of Blanche, niece to King John, and Lewis, Dauphin of France.

King John is often overlooked when one reads Shakespeare, and it should not be, as it has some great things to add to the canon. By the way, I give "King John" a 3.5 star rating compared to other Shakespeare, not to literature as a whole. The Bard is in a class of his own. The Pelican series edition of this play has a very nice introduction by Claire McEachern in which she gives an informative discourse on the character of Philip the Bastard. Although Philip usually gets all the critical attention in this piece my favorite character is Constance, sister in law to King John and the mother of John's rival for the English throne. Act III:1 give Constance a chance to really show her stuff. She has some blistering moments, and Act III as a whole is by far the most engaging and strongest in the play. Constance's exit from the piece is her best scene and Shakespeare writes a grieving mother's storm of emotions as strongly as in any of his other works. At its core King John is really a play about the medieval issues brought about by Pope v. Prince and how secular and religious power used each other for gain. You can almost feel Shakespeare's Protestant Elizabethan audience hissing at the machinations of the Catholic villain Cardinal Pandolph as he manipulates the French and English royal powers in some of the plays most intriguing scenes. Another fine moment is Act III:3 when King John and Hubert share a conversation that is delicious in its duplicity, and all of it achieved with minimal words. Despite a weak Act V (the only reason I feel this is not a 4 star effort by Shakespeare) the play ends on a patriotic note, sounding a clarion call for Englishmen to always unite in common cause.

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