The Life And Death Of King John
William Shakespeare

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The Life and Death of King John, a history play by William Shakespeare, dramatises the reign of John, King of England (ruled 1199−1216), son of Henry II of England and Eleanor of Aquitaine and father of Henry III of England. It is believed to have been written in the mid−1590s but was not published until it appeared in the First Folio in 1623.

John (24 December 1166 − 19 October 1216), also known as John Lackland or Softsword, was King of England from 6 April 1199 until his death. His reign saw the loss of the duchy of Normandy to the French king Philip II in 1204, resulting in the collapse of most of the Angevin Empire and the subsequent growth in the power of the Capetian dynasty over the rest of the 13th century. The baronial revolt at the end of John's reign saw the signing of the Magna Carta, a document often considered to be an early step in the evolution of the constitution of the United Kingdom.

Contemporary chroniclers were mostly critical of John's performance as king, and his reign has since been subject to significant debate and periodic revision by historians from the 16th century onwards. Historian Jim Bradbury has summarised the contemporary historical opinion of John's positive qualities, observing that John is today usually considered a "hard−working administrator, an able man, an able general". Nonetheless, modern historians agree that he also had many faults as king, including what historian Ralph Turner describes as "distasteful, even dangerous personality traits", such as pettiness, spitefulness and cruelty.

Popular representations of John first began to emerge during the Tudor period, mirroring the revisionist histories of the time. The anonymous play The Troublesome Reign of King John portrayed the king as a "proto−Protestant martyr", similar to that shown in John Bale's morality play Kynge Johan, in which John attempts to save England from the "evil agents of the Roman Church". By contrast, Shakespeare's play King John, whilst drawing on The Troublesome Reign for its source material and still relatively anti−Catholic, offers a more "balanced, dual view of a complex monarch as both a proto−Protestant victim of Rome's machinations and as a weak, selfishly motivated ruler." (Summary by Wikipedia)

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