

THE DUBUQUE SHAKESPEARE PROJECT

at the Carnegie Stout Library, Dubuque, IA

Winter 2025

MAKING OF A LEADER

King John

Synopsis: Set further back than any other history, *King John* deals with rival claims to the English throne after the death of Richard I (the Lionheart). The brother John occupies the throne guided by his mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine. The King of France supports John's nephew Arthur, a young boy who has a better claim through primogeniture. The power plays are crude, accidental fate introducing further uncertainty.

Discussion Topics:

- The idea of primogeniture (first son ascending to the title) was just beginning to take hold in Europe when the events of King John are set. While John and Arthur have competing claims, it is the proudly illegitimate Bastard Faulconbridge who dominates the play. How does Shakespeare interrogate the ideas of self and legitimacy with different characters?
- Commodity or self-interest is the driving force for most characters. How does the Bastard's speech illuminate how commodity works and how he himself chooses to work with and around it? What role does fate play?
- In a play full of cynical politicking where none of the royals or religious figures behave properly, the Bastard Faulconbridge and the boy Arthur stand out as moral centers. Yet, their approaches as well as fates are quite different. How does Shakespeare develop these characters as moral centers and how does he portray the development of a moral compass, especially in the Bastard and in Hubert, the executioner?
- Unusually for Shakespeare in general and histories in particular, mothers and sons dominate the play with Eleanor/ John, Constance/ Arthur and Lady Faulconbridge/ Robert, Philip. How does Shakespeare use mothers and sons to illuminate birthright and character?

Folger Text Link: <https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/king-john/>

Kanopy Film link: <https://www.kanopy.com/en/product/5332792?vp=dubuque&frontend=kui>

Other resources to consider:

Hamnet by Maggie O'Farrell (2020) A fictional work about the effect of son Hamnet's death on William and Agnes Shakespeare.

Jan 12, 2025 2 PM

Carnegie-Stout Public Library 360 W 11th Street, Dubuque, IA