Shakespeare en devenir
ISSN électronique 1958-9476
shakespeareendevenir@univ-poitiers.fr

N° 18 | 2024

“Mad Composition!”: Gender, Historiography, and Performance in Royal Shakespeare Company Productions of *King John* (2012, 2019)

Par Elizabeth Dieterich
Publication en ligne le 14 décembre 2024

> **Pour citer ce document**

Elizabeth Dieterich, « “Mad Composition!”: Gender, Historiography, and Performance in Royal Shakespeare Company Productions of *King John* (2012, 2019) », *Shakespeare en devenir* [En ligne], n°18, 2024, mis à jour le 14/12/2024, URL : https://shakespeare.edel.univ-poitiers.fr/index.php?id=3184.

1 Shakespeare's *The Life and Death of King John* (first performed c. 1596) invites its audience into a dangerously unstable version of Medieval England where divine right, authority, and gender roles are thrown into confusion.[1] The play juxtaposes radical nationalism with anxious ambivalence toward the legitimacy of the crown. Among Shakespeare's plays, however, *King John* is a bit of an outlier and is sometimes dismissed by artists and scholars alike as being poorly constructed or confusing.[2] Indeed, it seems almost obligatory for scholarship on *King John* to begin by noting how understudied and seldom performed it is.[3] This outlier status makes some sense from both literary and historical perspectives. John "Lackland"—so-called because, as a youngest son, he was not expected to inherit any territories—is remembered as a volatile and poor ruler overshadowed by his father, Henry II, his brother, Richard the Lionhearted, and his mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine. In modern media, he is often portrayed as a schemer or cartoonish villain.[4] For students of history, John's reign is primarily remembered for the episode in which he was forced to sign Magna Carta, which limited the monarch's power—a moment that Shakespeare's play omits.

2 For contemporary theatre practitioners, however, the play's perceived flaws can provide space to work dramaturgical magic free from audience preconceptions that accompany more famous Shakespearean works. In the 2010s, two Royal Shakespeare Company productions seized upon the opportunity to creatively recontextualize the play's themes. Maria Aberg's 2012 production and Eleanor Rhode's 2019 production, both staged at the RSC's Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon, engage with contemporary issues of gender and politics, most notably through the casting of women in major roles traditionally played by men. This article examines how Aberg's choice to cast Pippa Nixon as the Bastard and Rhode's decision to cast Rosie Sheehy as King John, rather than being distracting anachronisms or failed experiments against type, align closely with the themes of Shakespeare's text.[5] The metatheatricality, ambivalence, and historiographic concerns of *King John*, as well as its inherent interest in gender, all become strikingly legible when illuminated by the dramaturgical approaches

of Aberg and Rhode.[6] These productions underscore the play's ambivalence regarding legitimacy and the authority of the state and highlight its metatheatrical approach to history. By emphasising the play's self-reflexive historiography, the Aberg and Rhode productions of *King John* invite the audience to see history—with a view from both Shakespeare's era and from modernity—as a narrative that is always actively being performed.

3 In Shakespeare's *King John*, legitimacy is a fluid, arbitrary concept. In this way, Shakespeare's play contrasts other plays about the same monarch that were composed in the late sixteenth century. John Bale's morality *Kynge Johan* (1538) and the anonymous *Troublesome Reign of King John* (c. 1589) took the king's (anachronistic) anti-Catholicism and absolute attitude about divine right to the extreme.[7] Rather than completely assert John's legitimacy as king, Shakespeare takes a characteristically "two-eyed" view of his subject, seeing John as both a sort-of proto-Protestant hero *and* a weak usurper and leveraging the ambivalence with which the playwright crafts all his histories.[8] John occupies the throne *de facto* but not necessarily *de jure*—by his "strong possession much more than [his] right"—as his mother, Queen Eleanor, reminds him (I.1.40).[9] Like Eleanor, the play simultaneously champions John while repeatedly asserting that he is *not* the rightful king of England—ultimately failing to assert whether his legitimacy actually matters in the end. Beyond monarchical legitimacy, Shakespeare shows that personal legitimacy within society is similarly arbitrary and mutable. Through the character of the Bastard, Philip Faulconbridge, the play explores the similarities and articulations between monarchical and personal legitimacy and the role of an individual within the body politic. The 2012 and 2019 RSC productions amplify the play's ambivalence through abstraction and anachronism both in their design and by casting young actresses in the roles of a female Bastard (for Aberg) and a masculine-leaning-but-gender-fluid King John (for Rhode).

4 It was the project of Tudor history plays—a genre invented by the playwrights of Shakespeare's era—to define 'Englishness' in opposition to outside threats and stoke nationalism in English

audiences.[10] For most of Shakespeare's histories, this project of nationalist fervour is articulated through stirring speeches from historical figures such as John of Gaunt, Henry Bolingbroke, Prince Hal, or Thomas Cranmer. In *King John*, however, the play's most cogent nationalist arguments come from a figure *outside* the historical record: the Bastard. The character of the Bastard underscores how the play is unique in its historiographic approach and how it "mocks and inverts the themes, conventions, and strategies generally associated with the history play."[11] For this reason, Virginia Mason Vaughan goes as far as to explicitly call King John "Shakespeare's postmodern history play."[12] The Bastard bridges the audience and the play's action, guiding them through John's tumultuous reign and creating an almost-Brechtian distancing effect through which the audience is invited to share in the play's ambivalence. After John loses his disastrous war with France and dies, not valiantly in battle, but when he is poisoned by an English monk, it is the Bastard who concludes the play with a stirring speech about what it means for him—and potentially for the audience—to be English and fight for England:

> This England never did nor never shall
> Lie at the proud foot of a conqueror
> But when it first did help to wound itself.
> Now these her princes are come home again,
> Come the three corners of the world in arms
> And we shall shock them. Naught shall make us rue,
> If England to itself do rest but true. (V.7.118-124)

5 As Brian Carroll writes, *King John*, and the character of the Bastard in particular, "encourage[s] playgoers to think of themselves as individuals with the agency necessary to *choose* nation rather than merely exist as subjects whose nation chose them."[13] The Bastard's liminal position between audience and action, coupled with the character's centrality to the play's metatheatrical historiography practically invites the sort of "non-traditional" approach that Maria Aberg takes in casting Pippa Nixon in the part. While other characters from the play are lifted from history, the Bastard, in

Marsha Robinson's words, "has no legitimate relationship to the past […] neither a bias to support nor a historiographic model to uphold."[14] Not only does the historiography of *King John* chart new territory, but the Bastard's insider-outsider status, with no "legitimate relationship" to the history he comments on, mirrors Shakespeare's own self-fashioned position in Elizabethan society.[15] The Bastard's position in society evolves from his modest birth, to accepting outright his illegitimacy, to rising to the king's inner circle.

6 Shakespeare's Bastard Philip Faulconbridge is in part a composite of documented, high-ranking mediaeval- and Reformation-era bastards and in part an invention of the Tudor era.[16] As A. J. Piesse writes, the Bastard is "utterly unlike any other kind of character in the canon" and through him "Shakespeare is deliberately drawing attention to the conventions of playing and […] writing history," since the character "observes events as they transpire and translates the rhetoric in which they are framed as historic deeds into a language that penetrates the pretensions of kings and princes."[17] Philip's younger brother, Robert claims Philip's land under the accusation that his elder brother's father was not Sir Robert Faulconbridge, but King Richard I. King John resolves the dispute by legitimising Philip according to the conclusion that his parents were married when he was born. However, recognizing Philip's similarities to Richard the Lionhearted, Queen Eleanor offers Philip a choice: to "be a Faulconbridge / And […] to enjoy [his] land" or to be "the reputed son of Coeur de Lion," which would make him a Bastard, merely the "Lord of [his own] presence, and no land besides" (I.1.137-140). The Bastard leaps at the chance to shake the provincial dust from his feet and join Eleanor and John in their war against France. Although the Bastard acclimates his "mounting spirit" to his role in the royal family, he retains a core hybridity—simultaneously having been legitimised by the king and having rejected his legitimation—remaining, in his words, "a bastard to the time" (I.1.212-13). Pippa Nixon's portrayal of the Bastard highlights the character's insider-outsider position; both the gender change of the character and Nixon's characterisation call the audience's attention to the ways in which the Bastard

personifies the play's interest in historiography, legitimacy, and gender dynamics.[18]

7 Aberg's production of *King John* was staged as part of the RSC's 2012 "Nations at War" trilogy, along with *A Soldier in Every Son: The Rise of the Aztecs* and *Richard III*.[19] Staged alongside these plays, Aberg's production prompts audiences to consider the function and scope of history plays and global politics. Furthermore, changes to gender through casting modernise, highlight, and complicate the aspects of Shakespeare's project I have described above.[20] In an interview with *The Guardian*, Aberg explains that her choice to cast the Bastard as a woman "'started off with a curiosity about seeing a woman tackling what is, in a cliched way, a very masculine part.'"[21] While gender changes in contemporary productions of Shakespeare are commonplace, in Nixon's words, her character has also been "reinvent[ed]" for this production.[22] Aberg differentiates her casting choice from other gender changes in prior Shakespeare productions, explaining that Nixon's role is "'quite different from, say, Kathryn Hunter or Fiona Shaw playing a Shakespearean king.'"[23] Perhaps it is because of the "cliched masculine" aspects of the character of the Bastard that casting a young, energetic woman like Nixon "'changed the dynamic between the characters quite profoundly.'" However, what might seem like seismic changes to the play instead reveal core aspects of the play's interests in gender. A female Bastard, Aberg says, "'backs up [Eleanor] and Constance, following their thought into action, and making the women the heart and strength of the play.'"[24] Nixon's characterisation is distinctly feminine; her costume consists of a base of brightly coloured, geometrically patterned leggings and a short, sleeveless black dress, beginning the play by singing, accompanying herself on the ukulele.[25] Her behaviour onstage exudes energy and power coded with a sense of femininity that highlights underlying gender politics and, particularly in her interactions with Alex Waldmann's King John, sexual tensions of Shakespeare's text.

8 Act II of *King John* begins with the armies of England and France meeting in front of the town of Angiers in France is a catalyst for

much of the play's action and highlights its concerns with gender. King John and King Philip of France debate which of them has further overextended the legitimate bounds of his divinely ordained authority to rule (II.1.119-120). Their argument is quickly monopolised by Queen Eleanor (Siobhan Redmond) and Constance (Susie Trayling), the widow of John's older brother Geoffrey and mother of rival claimant to the English throne, Arthur. As Eleanor and Constance insult each other's sons, themes of gender and legitimacy converge:

> QUEEN ELEANOR. Who is it thou dost call usurper, France?
> CONSTANCE. Let me make answer: thy usurping son.
> QUEEN ELEANOR. Out, insolent! Thy bastard shall be king
> That thou mayst be a queen and check the world.
> CONSTANCE. … My boy a bastard? By my soul, I think
> His father never was so true begot.
> It cannot be, an if thou wert his mother.
> (II.1.121-124, 130-132)

9 As Phyllis Rackin writes, in *King John*, the power of speeches by Eleanor and Constance "exposes, like nothing else in any of Shakespeare's histories, the arbitrary and conjectural nature of patriarchal succession and the suppressed centrality of women to it."[26] Adding the voice of Nixon's Bastard to the debate between Eleanor and Constance amplifies this suppressed centrality and legitimises female voices in discourse.[27] Since Nixon dons a tuxedo jacket over her black dress for this scene, audience members might suspect at first that the character has taken on a masculine quality, but this is quickly proven not to be so. Following the barbs of Eleanor and Constance, the Bastard and Austria enter the fray, trading threats. Louis the Dauphin interjects, demanding, "Women and fools, break off your conference!" (II.1.153). In Louis' binate epithet—"[w]omen and fools"—"women" has three obvious referents (Eleanor, Constance, and the Bastard), making "fools" apparently aimed at the three *men* on the stage who have been arguing—Austria, Philip, and John. While the men heed the Dauphin, Eleanor and Constance are unwilling to submit and are

immediately at each other's throats again, personally insulting each other and invoking their knowledge of the law in their debate.

10 The authority that Constance and Eleanor wield in Shakespeare's original text—their wilfulness, their knowledge of the law—is underscored in Aberg's adaptation by Nixon's outspoken Bastard, who values raw power as much as Eleanor and Constance value the law. In an aside, while all other actors freeze in place, Nixon's Bastard declares her desire to see "the rich blood of kings … set on fire" (II.1.365).[28] The Bastard is bored by the tepid response of the Citizens of Angiers and long-winded debate over who is the king. The Bastard's reveals her plan for a fiery display of *de facto* power that demonstrates the production's deft use of metatheatre. In both Aberg's and Rhode's productions, multiple actors appear on the balconies of the Swan Theatre beside audience members to deliver the Citizens' lines. Implicating the theatre's actual audience in the noncommittal response of the Citizens who stand beside them, she declares, "By heaven, these scroyles of Angiers flout you kings, / And stand securely on their battlements / *As in a theatre*, whence they gape and point" (II.1.673-676, emphasis mine).[29] This moment demonstrates the commitment to metatheatre in Shakespeare's text and the underlying implication that politics affects the entire social body—a theme that Eleanor Rhode doubles down on in her 2019 production, which I will discuss below.

11 In Aberg's production, and in the scenes at Angiers specifically, feminine energy fills the aural and visual landscape that helps reveal more of what is at stake as far as gender in *King John*.[30] Throughout the production, the play's tightly controlled verse lines are expanded or contracted to accommodate for the gender of Nixon's Bastard.[31] Visually, the wedding scene between Louis the Dauphin (Oscar Pearce) and Blanche (Natalie Klamar) is a frothy array of pastel colours and sumptuous fabrics. Blanche floats across the stage in a wedding dress supported by layers of pink tulle puffing out from under her skirt; Eleanor (Siobhan Redmond) wears a satin gown that glows under the stage lights. The exuberant wedding feast is represented by a music and dancing interlude full of pop songs made famous by female singers. The ensemble

performs karaoke to "Say a Little Prayer for You," then "(I've Had) The Time of My Life" plays and Louis hoists Blanche high in the air for an impressive re-creation of the famous *Dirty Dancing* move, after which the ensemble exits to Rihanna's "We Found Love." Throughout this pop-culture-inflected interlude, Nixon's Bastard presides like a Lord of Misrule. She both participates in the festivities and remains slightly outside them, bridging the audience and the ensemble.[32] As the revellers gather on the upstage steps, the Bastard pauses and raises a camera to photograph them. While she facilitates the commemoration of the event, the Bastard is conspicuously outside the "official" record of the wedding. The ensemble freezes for the picture while Nixon delivers the play's famous speech on "Commodity," the "vile-drawing bias" that lures kings away from "resolved and honorable war" (II.1.605-613). The juxtaposition of pop femininity through the music and dancing alongside the Bastard's explication of the dishonourable "commodity" exchange—in which Blanche has been traded alongside commodities of land and titles—colours the Bastard's monologue in new shades. In this context, the Bastard's speech lays bare how dependent the State is on the participation of women's bodies in its machinations. By retaining her own agency as a woman and a liminal participant in the affairs of the State, Nixon's Bastard holds the production back from a sheer drop into a patriarchal abyss. While Blanche cannot escape the clutches of patriarchal rule once she is married to the Dauphin, Nixon's Bastard adds her voice to the counter-patriarchal speeches delivered by Constance later in the play. Aberg's production underscores the "suppressed centrality" of women's voices in the original text by breaking open that text so that the Bastard, as Aberg puts it, "backs up" the other women in the play.[33]

12 Nixon's Bastard is conflated with the play's secondary mouthpiece in voicing its concerns over legitimacy, authority, and power: Hubert. Conflating the roles of the Bastard and Hubert has an effect like *doubling*—having one actor play multiple different roles in the same play.[34] Conflating these characters suggests, in the same way doubling does, that both Hubert and the Bastard are defined by the narratives imposed upon them.[35] However, both Hubert and the

Bastard enjoy similarly intimate relationships with King John—an intimacy that's amplified when they are the same person. In a review of Aberg's play, Peter Kirwan points out how Nixon's casting "lent extraordinary resonance to the play's constant talk of love," which is particularly legible in John's scenes with Hubert, or in this case, Nixon's Bastard.[36] When the king manipulates Hubert into agreeing to kill the imprisoned Prince Arthur, John and Hubert exchange a series of short phrases, sharing what amounts to an *almost* complete line of verse:

> KING JOHN. Death
> HUBERT. My lord?
> KING JOHN. A grave.
> HUBERT. He will not live. (III.3.70-3)

13 Sharing lines of verse ramps up intimacy between characters. On the early modern stage, shared verse lines would have raised the tension in the playhouse. Shakespeare's audiences, highly attuned to aural cues, would be gripped by listening to this quick exchange of short syllables.[37] After Hubert's line, John breaks the tension of the moment with the extra-metrical "Enough" (III.3.74). The king continues: "Hubert, I love thee." He then begins a new, complete verse line: "Well, I'll not say what I intend for thee" (III.3.75-6). The script for this production changes the final line of their dialogue slightly, first omitting "Hubert," but then updating the rest of the line with the more modern (if also, technically, more formal) "I love *you*."[38] The way Waldmann's John gazes upon his scene partner's face and the way in which he intones "what I intend for thee" makes it clear that his intentions are romantic. This overt romantic-sexual dynamic between John and the Bastard in this scene is underscored by the relative youth of the two actors. As Peter Kirwan writes, "Waldmann was a young and reckless king, openly sexual in his behaviour."[39] Typically, John is played by a middle-aged or older man (the Bastard's age varies), but at the time of this production, both Waldmann and Nixon were in their early thirties—though their expressive energy makes them seem even younger.[40] Such overt sexual tension between John and the Bastard potentially reveals a

bond of affection between John and his closest advisors that is latent in Shakespeare's text but is easily obscured by heteronormativity.[41]

14 The sexually charged dynamic between the two characters also reveals a volatile power imbalance between Nixon's Bastard and Waldmann's John. In the fourth act of Shakespeare's play, misunderstandings over whether Hubert—or in Aberg's production, the Bastard—has fulfilled John's orders for Arthur's murder (which were not carried out) clashes with John's shame and regret at ordering the boy's death (which eventually occurs anyway). John becomes enraged with Hubert. In Aberg's production, the ensuing scene between John and the Bastard was channelled into a deeply disturbing sequence of sexually motivated violence. Peter Kirwan's review of the play describes the actors' "terrified energy" as Waldmann's John, "enraged and terrified, grabbed hold of the woman he 'loved' and proceeded to enact an abortive rape on her, wrenching at her breasts and pinning her to the floor as she sobbed in simultaneous pain and regret."[42] Such a moment is, of course, still conceivable in a production in which Hubert is played by an actor of the same gender as John, but in this scene, the hyper-legibility of the heteroerotic sexual tension between these characters is extreme. The scene intensifies the sexual power dynamics lurking under the surface of Shakespeare's play and shifts the language of the scene to bring the sexual—and moreover, political—power dynamics of the play into focus. John's accusatory line blaming Hubert for his plan to kill Arthur, "Hadst not thou been by, / A fellow by the hand of nature marked … This murder had not come into my mind" (IV.2.231-234), is partly changed to "[a] *woman* by the hand of nature marked."[43] In Shakespeare's text, this line implies that Hubert is ugly, deformed, or even disabled.[44] Aberg's revision, however, means that Waldmann's John appears to blame the Bastard's *femininity*—the way in which she is marked *as a woman* by the hand of nature. In an attempt to subdue the femininity that has led him astray, Waldmann's John attacks and grapples with Nixon's Bastard, sitting atop her, pinning her hands. While John asserts his physical power over the Bastard in this scene, the RSC's *Prompt Book* has a handwritten note alongside the scene

stating that it is here that "the balance of power between KJ + B shifts."[45] This shift occurs moments after their grappling, when the Bastard is finally able to explain that Arthur is alive. John begs the Bastard for forgiveness, hugging her in the final lines of the scene.[46]

15 As Aberg's production progresses, it solidifies links between the femininity of Nixon's Bastard, its ambivalent view of legitimacy, and its critique of misogyny, in part through the relationship between Nixon's character and Prince Arthur. Shakespeare's play suggests that Arthur of Brittany is not only rightful heir to the throne by Tudor understandings of primogeniture, but that he is also *more fit to* be the king of England than his "unnatural uncle" John (II.1.10).[47] Captured by the English and sentenced to die, Arthur gracefully talks his way out of getting his eyes brutally extracted by a hot iron; his persuasive and gentle nature wins Hubert, his would-be-assassin, over. Arthur is graceful and brave in the face of inescapable mortal danger. Since, in Aberg's production, Hubert is subsumed into the character of the Bastard, Arthur's lines in the would-be-execution scene are changed to call Nixon's Bastard "cousin" instead of "Hubert"; the Bastard's lines are changed from "your uncle" to "our uncle."[48] Arthur has a familial intimacy with the Bastard, but, unlike John, he treats her with respect and affection instead of with misogyny and violence. However, after the Bastard leaves him (and tells John the boy is alive) Arthur attempts to escape by jumping from his prison walls, reasoning that it is "[a]s good to die and go as die and stay" a prisoner (IV.3.8). As he falls, Arthur cries out that his uncle John is "in these stones" (IV.3.9). As A. J. Piesse writes, Arthur has an "implicit understanding of the extent of John's unfitness" and the simultaneous inevitability of the usurper's rule. John and England are inextricably, even physically, linked, but "instead of the nurturing, nourishing, fertile land so frequently invoked in the history plays, England," and by association John himself, "is death-dealing stones."[49] When the Bastard finds Arthur's body, she laments:

> From forth this morse of dead royalty,
> The life, the right, and truth of all this realm
> Is fled to heaven, and England now is left
> To tug and scamble and to part by th' teeth
> The unowed interest of proud-swelling state.
> (IV.3.150-155)

16 In Shakespeare's text, this speech happens within a conversation between Hubert and the Bastard, but since Nixon is playing both characters, she delivers the lines alone onstage and her soliloquy draws the audience into her articulation of Arthur as the "[t]he life, the right, and truth" of England. Next to this speech in the RSC *Prompt Book* there is a note: "B binds herself to England's future."[50] When the Bastard returns to John with news of Arthur's death, John gives the Bastard "the ordering of this present time" (V.1.79). The RSC *Prompt Book* notes that, through this decree, "KJ gives B [permission] to speak for England."[51] The dramaturgical choices that Aberg makes in the second half of this production stress how King John loses his authority as the play progresses. Collapsing together Hubert and the Bastard into the character played by Pippa Nixon not only expands and emphasises the roles of women in the play from merely being mothers and wives, but also demonstrates how self-fashioned political agency can be inflected with both boldness—as the Bastard demonstrates in battle—and care—as the Bastard demonstrates in relation to Arthur.

17 The stage design of Aberg's production, by Naomi Dawson, without a throne or any court scenery strips away the grandeur typically associated with monarchy and aims the audience's focus directly at the bodies of actors. Meanwhile, the minimalist set pieces that are used take on great symbolic value. In John's second coronation scene, the backdrop, made up of dozens of glowing multicoloured balloons, is released across the stage along with confetti. John stands unmoving in the blue light of an empty stage while Wye Oak's song "Civilian" plays and balloons scatter around him.[52] The back wall of the Swan Theatre is revealed, where a neon sign reads,

in an all-lower-case script, "*for god and england*." This reminder of the historiographic, religious, and political interests of the play loom over the second half of the production, including the scenes of John's reconciliation with Rome and the Bastard's receiving of "the ordering of this present time" (V.1.79). King John succumbs to poison in the final scene of the production, which the *Prompt Book* notes is "simultaneously—a nightmare, or a hallucination."[53] A cacophony of voices spread news of John's poisoning by a monk while the song "Beggin'" by The Four Seasons plays.[54] Waldmann staggers around the stage wrenching at his clothes while the "*for god and england*" sign flickers and the remaining balloons bounce aimlessly around the stage.

Figure 1. Alex Waldmann as King John in Maria Aberg's 2012 production.
Crédits. Photo by Keith Pattison, RSC. Used with permission of the Royal Shakespeare Company.

18 His mental and physical decline suggests that even the legitimacy of a king can be eroded or lost over time—flickering in and out, flimsy as a balloon. He finally collapses, crawls across the stage, and ends up in the Bastard's arms, creating a *Pieta*-like tableau, and dies. The young Prince Henry picks up John's crown and stands apart while Nixon delivers the Bastard's final speech. This version of the speech, however, omits two lines: "But when it first did help to wound itself. / Now these her princes are come home again" (V.7.120-121). Instead of focusing on the disastrous war that has raged on for the entire play, Aberg's production ends with a clear declaration of England's commitment to move on from the disastrous reign of the weak King John and "to itself […] rest but true" (V.7.124).[55] In her final speech, Nixon's Bastard emphasises her hard-won political and historiographic authority—even if the specificities of "This England" remain a bit uncertain.

19 Even before the Bastard's final speech, an audience member at *King John* will hear the word "England" more times than in any other of Shakespeare's works.[56] Such a clear focus on the State of England is to be expected from Shakespeare's "most political play."[57] *King John* is the play in which Shakespeare is *most* interested in unpacking the idea of "*this England*", but Michael Gadaleto raises a crucial question on this point: "But what England exactly? These lines […] have been much debated, with critics often wondering how to square their closing patriotic message of national unity and self-reliance with the rest of this most 'troublesome' history."[58] Contemporary productions, particularly Aberg's and Rhode's RSC productions, help uncover the play's capacity to force its audience to confront what "This England" can mean.[59] Gadaleto writes that the England of Shakespeare's *King John* "at last arrives at a surer knowledge of what it is" by the play's conclusion.[60] While this may be the case in Shakespeare's text, both Aberg's and Rhode's stagings of the play explode the possibility of any such concrete conclusion; "This England" can come to mean a multitude of different things *or* be a perpetually unstable notion. By pressuring the play to reveal how it disrupts notions of nationalism, historiography, gender, and performance, the dramaturgical choices of these productions force us not just to reconfigure our

scholarly understanding of the play, but of the impact that Shakespearean adaptation can have in modernity.[61]

20 In a behind-the-scenes video interview by the RSC, Aberg states that she intended her production to remind audiences of the "greed and fickleness" of irresponsible politicians in the present day.[62] In the same interview, John Stahl (King Philip of France), reflects on how much the indecisiveness of politicians reminds him of the 2012 debates between the Scottish Parliament and David Cameron's government in London and compares between the rapidly shifting allegiances in Shakespeare's play and the contemporary 24-hour news cycle.[63] However, Aberg's production resists directly representing any specific political moment, instead retaining an ambiguously contemporary era featuring costumes and set pieces that would not be out of place either in the 1980s or in a heavily-filtered Instagram feed of 2012.[64] The play, which is *technically* set in the Middle Ages, evokes various points in British history (1200s, 1980s, 2012), and in this way forces the spectator to reckon with *which* England, exactly, "This England" refers to, and which associations they ought to bring to their spectatorship of the action. The Middle Ages, "Bad" King John, Magna Carta, Shakespeare's London, Thatcher's Britain, and the unknowns of a New Millennium all tumble together. Nixon's Bastard, a character jolted from cliched masculinity to raucous femininity, revels so thoroughly in the carnivalesque setting that the audience is meant to understand that the very notion of "This England" has always been inherently unstable.

21 Given the rarity of productions of *King John*, it is interesting that the Royal Shakespeare Company decided to mount another production of the play only seven years after Aberg's. Eleanor Rhode's 2019 *King John* similarly focuses on the disruption of the play's gender politics by casting Rosie Sheehy as King John. However, striking differences between the two productions demonstrate how different, even contradictory, approaches can reveal how multifaceted the play is. While Aberg's production was a pop-inflected, exuberant journey through an unstable landscape, Rhode's production is significantly darker, doubling down on the

arbitrariness of political power and the abject despair of a country governed by incompetent rulers. In many ways, the structure and script of the play are more 'faithful' to the original text, but the gender change of King John reveals much about how the play's ambivalence, historiography, and metatheatricality remain relevant in the modern era. The darkness at the heart of the production is legible in large part through the family dynamics, which reveal both the domestic nature of the political and highlight the intersection between gender and politics. Connections to 2019 Britain creep in; Josie Rourke, another RSC director, has claimed that *King John* is "the perfect Brexit play," and, indeed, the production coincided with Britain's official exit from the European Union in January 2020.[65] Of her approach, Rhode says, "The way I've approached it is to look at this play […] as a family at war [since] the state of the nation begins at home."[66] The production maintains dynamic interplay between the State, the family, and the individual as it addresses themes of ambivalence and gender fluidity.

22 The lights come up on a domestic scene as Sheehy's King John, hungover from his coronation, ambles through a destroyed party scene quaffing a Bloody Mary (complete with raw egg) in his bathrobe while the radio broadcasts the BBC. From Sheehy's appearance and costume, it seems at first as if John might instead be a *queen*, but the audience soon hears Sheehy's character referred to as "King" and "him." Unlike in many other gender-crossed, swapped, or changed roles in Shakespeare, Sheehy plays her role as male.[67] Sheehy herself describes the character's gender not as binary but "'fluid," saying, "'I sort of just play him as me.'"[68] Sheehy's long hair cascades in a high ponytail throughout much of the play, and her costumes convey neither masculinity nor femininity. In contrast to Aberg's, Rhode's production plays on the *fluidity* of gender rather than highlighting gender binaries or underscoring the female strength in the play.[69] The differences between the semiotic registers of the two productions highlight the vast potential for interpretation for this play so deeply invested in destabilising semiotic order. The contrast between the visual and rhetorical signs of Sheehy's King John—her feminine body and male pronouns—force the audience to reckon with the deep ambivalence

of *King John* and with the reality that gender is a performance uncoupled from bodily signifiers.[70]

23 The abstracted visual landscape of the production, designed by Max Johns, leans toward 1960-70s Britain. Unlike in Aberg's production, there is no literal sign upstage to explicitly remind the characters (and audience) that they strive "*for god and England*." Instead, a different kind of 'sign' looms over the play in the form of a backdrop with a giant, mediaeval-style drawing of Sheehy staring out from under a large crown and looking much younger than she appears onstage—almost childlike (even though Sheehy is in her twenties in this production; like Waldmann, quite young for an actor playing King John). The spectral presence of this girlish image looms over the stage for the entirety of the play, creating a parallel between this representation of John and the boy Arthur and suggesting that whether the king is one child or another, it hardly matters. The ambivalence with which the production begins turns to despair with the marriage of Louis (Brian Martin) and Blanche (Nadi Kemp-Sayfi). While Aberg's wedding scene was joyful, in Rhode's production Louis and Blanche are outwardly antagonistic throughout the ensemble's tightly choreographed dance sequences set to hauntingly instrumental jazz. The Bastard's (Michael Abubakar) "Commodity" speech occurs *before* the wedding in this production (in its textually faithful place), and so his incredulousness at the shifting whims of monarchs is detached from the marriage. Instead, the wedding is simply deeply, arbitrarily, uncomfortable. In the aftermath of Cardinal Pandulph's (Katherine Pearce) visit and John's excommunication, a series of balloons spelling out "JUST MARRIED" are popped and the remaining balloons are slightly rearranged to spell "JUST DIE." There is no love lost between the royal families of Rhode's *King John*. The flippancy demonstrated by Sheehy's John in arranging and presiding over the non-consensual wedding of Blanche to Louis in pursuit of "Commodity" demonstrates that patriarchy is a force not limited to certain kinds of bodies, ages, or genders but that patriarchy, wielded by the ruling class to maintain power, pervades society from the top down. And the production offers little in the way of hope in light of such a system.

24 Throughout Rhode's production, the stage space darkens as John falls from grace with England and with God as he attempts to tighten his grasp on power. The shift into literal and metaphorical darkness at first appears to align with a shift into femininity for Sheehy's John, since, in the re-coronation scene of the fourth act, Sheehy dons a ballgown. The costume design threatens the audience with the notion that the feminine or the queer are inherently destructive.[71]

Figure 2. Rosie Sheehy as King John and the Company in *King John* from Eleanor Rhode's 2019 Production.
Crédits. Photo by Steve Tanner, RSC. Used with permission of the Royal Shakespeare Company.

25 However, the choreography and characterization as John falls from grace makes it clear that is not the *fault* of John's femininity, masculinity, or gender-fluidity but that he is a bad king because he obstinately clings to unnecessary displays of *de facto* power, such as this unnecessary second coronation. Sheehy's John sits high on a throne directly below the girlish backdrop behind him with an expression of scorn and pride, underscoring how he really is, as the Bastard will say in the following scene, the "proud-swelling state" (IV.3.155). The Lords Pembroke and Salisbury express incredulity at John's display of "wasteful and ridiculous excess" that comes at "a

time unseasonable" and sows distrust in the nation (IV.2.16, 20). As in the wedding scene, the second coronation explicitly demonstrates how every *body* is equally susceptible to patriarchy, misogyny, and to enacting poor leadership.

26 The postmodern arbitrariness of the play continues with its lack of closure. Unlike the final scene of Aberg's production where King John collapsed, Christ-like, in a cacophonous fever dream, the death of Sheehy's King John death is bleak and hyper-realistic. While Hubert (Tom McCall) looks on, the poisoned King John shakes in a small metal bathtub, sputtering his final speech while blood bubbles on his lips and pools underneath him. The king's death is not communicated through the telling- and re-telling of rumours, as with Waldmann's John. Instead, it is visceral and immediate. In its closing scene, Rhode's production has a final subversion to make to Shakespeare's text: Rhode has omitted the part of young Henry III altogether. The play, then, ends in ambiguity. John is dead, Arthur is dead, and the audience is left to wonder who the king will be now, since no one steps up to fill the void John has left. The Bastard delivers his final monologue with the same cynical tone he has used throughout the production, then leads the ensemble in a dirge, singing lyrics from Wilfred Owen's poem "Futility."[72] The subsequent tableau suggests that the Bastard's prediction for English steadfastness, that "[n]aught shall make us rue, / If England to itself do rest but true" is mistaken (V.7.123-4).

27 To close the play, the screen upstage rises and the characters from the French contingent burst forth from fog and smoke to engage in combat with English characters. Their battle surrounds the body of Sheehy's John, motionless in the bathtub, his gold crown resting on his chest. The implication of the tableau is that the French win the fight, since, after about a minute, what appear to be the ghosts of Constance and Prince Arthur appear victorious. Constance, smiling, takes up John's crown and offers it to her son. The stage goes dark. This ending to Rhode's production confirms, first, the sense in Shakespeare's text that John was *never* the rightful king, but also reminds the audience that all histories rewrite the history that they tell. This ending establishes an intertextual framework in which the

audience can read a painful arc of English history—one where, indeed, England does often "help to wound itself" (V.7.120). Whether the nation is torn apart by destructive wars waged between ruling class families or more contemporary concerns like Brexit, those who feel the impacts greatest will be the common people—those who are more like Hubert and the Bastard than King John. In an immediate post-Brexit political moment, coupled with the global COVID-19 pandemic that ended the play's run early, Rhode's production deliberately leaves much unresolved about the relationship between "This England," English families at all levels of society, and the rest of the world.

28 If, in Michael Gadaleto words, by the end of Shakespeare's *King John*, England "at last arrives at a surer knowledge of what it is," the two most recent RSC productions of the play demonstrate that both the play's journey to this national self-knowledge and the destination are mutable.[73] Building on the groundwork set by Maria Aberg's gender-swapped production, Eleanor Rhode's production goes beyond the gender binary to explore how the performance of gender is as fluid as the politics or national identity of mediaeval, early modern, or contemporary England. In these productions, as in Shakespeare's era, the audience in the amphitheatre playhouse and Swan Theatre alike are meant to understand that this play is also always about *the present England*. In that the play's depiction of nationhood is a warning, a prophecy, or a parody—or all the above—these productions participate meaningfully in the self-conscious critique that theatre can offer to culture and demonstrate how aesthetics and casting sharpen the messages of even the most obscure or overlooked Shakespearean dramas.

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Notes

[1] I am most grateful for feedback on the ideas in this article from my fellow seminar participants in “Actresses Playing Shakespearean Male Characters: Exception or Significant Change?” at the 2023 Conference of the European Shakespeare Research Association, particularly the organisers, Isabelle Schwartz-Gastine, Pascale Drouet, and Imke Lichterfeld. I also wish to thank Henry Aceves, Laura DeLuca, and Catherine Evans for constructive feedback on this article at various stages and the archivists and librarians at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Archive for their assistance in accessing and analysing archival materials of the Royal Shakespeare Company. Travel to the Shakespeare Birthplace archive was made possible in part by a Summer Fellowship from the Northeastern Modern Language Association.

[2] In anecdotal evidence of such dismissal by theatre professionals, while I was working as a dramaturg for a professional production of *King John*, an actor asked me one day, exasperated and puzzled over the play, “What would you say this play is even *about*, anyway?” In many ways, this article is my belated, extended answer to his question.

[3] Almost all critical treatments of *King John* note the play’s exclusion from the scholarly conversation and from professional stages over the centuries. Particularly illuminating are M. M. Reese’s narrative of the play’s life on stage and in scholarship in the seventeenth through mid-twentieth centuries. See: M. M. Reese, *The Cease of Majesty*, New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1962. Similarly, J. J. M. Tobin and Jesse M. Lander’s Introduction to the Arden 3rd Series has a detailed description of the play’s life onstage since the early eighteenth century. See: J. J. M. Tobin and Jesse M. Lander, “Introduction”, in J. J. M. Tobin, and Jesse M. Lander (eds.), *King John*,

William Shakespeare (author), London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019, p. 1-133.

[4] Consider Prince John's weakling character in James Goldman's 1966 play *The Lion in Winter*, or how modern adaptations of the tales of Robin Hood feature a bombastic or foolish Prince John the Regent who rules England in his brother Richard's absence; Disney's portrayal in the animated 1973 *Robin Hood* (dir. Wolfgang Reitherman) of Prince John as a scrawny, cowardly, thumb-sucking lion enveloped by a crown too big for his head stands out especially.

[5] In addition to the Bastard and King John, in both productions the character of Cardinal Pandulph is also played by women—in Aberg's production by Paola Dionisotti in Rhode's by Katherine Pearce. This article only addresses the roles of the Bastard and King John, leaving this fascinating pattern of female-casting for Pandulph open for further examination in future scholarship.

[6] All references to staging or performance choices such as blocking or direction from these two productions are based on personal viewing of filmed versions of the performances, or from the 2012 prompt book, when applicable. I saw Aberg's production in-person in 2012 and watched the streaming version of Rhode's production via the RSC's streaming platform. I also consulted the archived film version of Aberg's production, which is available in the RSC archives at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. See: *RSC/TS/2/2/2012/KJO, King John, Performance Recording (Access Copy), Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford-upon-Avon, Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, 2012* and Rhodri Huw (director), "Shakespeare: *King John*", William Shakespeare (writer), Tom Jackson Greaves (choreographer), Max Johns and Lizzie Powell (designers), John Frederick Wyver (producer), Rosie Sheehy and Michael Abubakar (performers), Eleanor Rhode (stage director), Stratford-upon-Avon, Royal Shakespeare Company, *Alexander Street*, 2021. URL. Accessed 5 May 2023.

[7] For more on the relationship between Shakespeare's play and his sources, particularly how Shakespeare moulded his play to

contemporary politics, see: Peter Lake, *How Shakespeare Put Politics on the Stage: Power and Succession in the History Plays,* New Haven, Yale UP, 2017 and J.J.M. Tobin, and Jesse M. Lander (eds.), *op. cit.*

[8] A. P. Rossiter famously describes Shakespeare's ambivalence as "two-eyed." Ambivalence, Rossiter writes, is "two opposed value-judgments [that] are subsumed" and yet are both valid, continuing, "[t]he whole is only fully experienced when both opposites are held and included in a 'two-eyed' view." See: A. P. Rossiter, *The Angel with Horns and Other Shakespeare Lectures*, London, Longmans Green and Co, Second Edition, 1962, p. 51.

[9] All quotations from *The Life and Death of King John* are taken from the Folger Shakespeare Library edition; William Shakespeare, *King John,* in Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine (eds.), Simon & Schuster, 2020. All references to this edition will be made parenthetically.

[10] Michael Gadaleto provides both invaluable historical context for and a compelling, in-depth analysis of the ways in which *King John* participates in England's emerging nationalism. See: Michael Gadaleto, "Shakespeare's Bastard Nation: Skepticism and the English Isle in *King John*", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 69, n°1, 2018, p. 3-34.

[11] Deborah T. Curren-Aquino, "Introduction: *King John* Resurgent", in Deborah T. Curren-Aquino (ed.), *King John: New Perspectives*, Newark, DE, University of Delaware Press, 1989, p. 24.

[12] Virginia Mason Vaughan, "King John", in Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard (eds.), *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works, Volume II*, Malden, MA and Oxford (UK), Blackwell Publishing, 2003, p. 379.

[13] Brian Carroll, "The Kingly Bastard & the Bastardly King: Nation, Imagination, and Agency in Shakespeare's *King John*", *Journal of the Wooden O Symposium*, vol. 13, 2013, p. 1, emphasis original.

[14] Marsha Robinson, "The Historiographic Methodology of *King John*", in Deborah T. Curren-Aquino (ed.), *King John: New Perspectives*, Newark, DE, University of Delaware Press, 1989, p. 35.

[15] See: Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980. Deborah T. Curren-Aquino notes how *King John* has major similarities to *Hamlet* in its treatment of Renaissance humanism. See: Deborah T. Curren-Aquino, *op. cit*., p. 17.

[16] A similar character is present in *The Troublesome Reign of King John*, but in Shakespeare's play Philip Faulconbridge is considerably more dynamic. Jacqueline Trace writes that "The Bastard's historical derivation … is an enigma to Shakespearean scholars, many of whom find him to be mainly fictional, or an 'invention' based on diverse sources." Trace asserts that the Bastard Philip Faulconbridge "originat[ed] in the figure of Philip of Cognac from Holinshed's *Chronicle*, [and] developed from [Shakespeare's] acquaintance with the Henrician Faulconbridge so closely associated with the anti papal policies of the Tudor princes" See: Jacqueline Trace, "Shakespeare's Bastard Faulconbridge: An Early Tudor Hero", *Shakespeare Studies*, vol. 14, 1980, p. 60, 68.

[17] A. J. Piesse, "*King John*: changing perspectives", in Michael Hattaway (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's History Plays*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 130.

[18] As Thomas Anderson puts it, the Bastard "functions within the play as the play itself as the play functions within culture," which holds true for performances of the play at any point in history—applying to Shakespeare's culture as much as to our own. See: Thomas Anderson, "'Legitimation, Name, and All Is Gone': Bastardy and Bureaucracy in Shakespeare's '*King John*'", *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, vol. 4, n° 2, 2004, p. 41.

[19] The "Nations at War" trilogy took place during the 2012 World Shakespeare Festival. *A Soldier in Every Son: The Rise of the Aztecs* is by

Luis Mario Moncada and was translated by Gary Owen; the play is about Aztecs in Mexico in the fourteenth century. *Richard III* was directed by Roxana Silbert. See: RSC, "Maria Aberg Production 2012", Royal Shakespeare Company. URL. Accessed 1 February 2023.

[20] Aberg's choices were groundbreaking not just for understanding the play, but for the RSC and for women in Shakespeare adaptations, generally; Sara Reimers situates Aberg's *King John* as "the first of a number of regenderings at [the RSC] that have started to open up the canon to female performers." See: Sara Reimers, *Casting and the Construction of Gender in Contemporary Stagings of Shakespeare's Plays*, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, *ProQuest*, 2017, p. 86.

[21] Maddy Costa, "RSC's *King John* casts women in major roles", *The Guardian*, 16 April 2012. URL. Accessed 3 March 2023.

[22] "Interview with the Cast of *King John*", *The Royal Shakespeare Company*, The Royal Shakespeare Company, *YouTube*, 20 April 2012. URL. Accessed 4 March 2023.

[23] *Ibid*.; Aberg is here referring to the Shakespeare's Globe 2003 production of *Richard III*, starring Kathryn Hunter and the National Theatre's 1995 production of *Richard II*, starring Fiona Shaw.

[24] *Ibid*.

[25] The Royal Shakespeare Company webpage for the play features a photo of Nixon from the play's opening that showcases her costume and shows her playing the ukulele. See: RSC, "Pippa Nixon as the Bastard in *King John*", Keith Pattison, (photographer), *Production Photos*, The Royal Shakespeare Company. URL. Accessed 26 August 2024.

[26] Phyllis Rackin, "Patriarchal History and Female Subversion", in Deborah T. Curren-Aquino (ed.), *King John*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 1989, p. 85. Elsewhere, Rackin argues that "our negative estimation of women's roles in the Elizabethan history play

may be, at least partly, an artefact of our own construction," since we tend to ignore the fact that women made up a significant portion of a commercial playgoing audience *and* because scholars have long paid more attention to plays that minimise women's roles, overlooking plays such as *King John*. See: Phyllis Rackin, "Women's Roles in the Elizabethan History Plays", in Michael Hattaway (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's History Plays*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 71-86.

[27] For Shakespeare's audience, the centrality of women's authority mirrors the authority of Queen Elizabeth. Furthermore, the arbitrary and mutable nature of bastardy and legitimacy is a social tension Elizabethans would be well familiar with, since the queen and her sister, Mary, were declared bastards during their father's reign. Furthermore, for Shakespeare's audience, Eleanor and Constance's powerful speeches would have been coloured by the fact that these characters were played by boys. For more on this, see: Gina Bloom, "Words Made of Breath: Gender and Vocal Agency in '*King John*'", *Shakespeare Studies*, vol. 33, 2005, p. 125-155.

[28] RSC/SM/1/2012/KJO1, *The Life and Death of King John Prompt Book (2012)*, Royal Shakespeare Company, Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Stratford-upon-Avon, UK, 2012, p. 16. All references to specific lines or staging choices refer to the Prompt Book for this production, housed in the Royal Shakespeare Company archives at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 17.

[30] For more analysis of women in this production, see Jami Rogers' review of the play: Jami Rogers, "*King John* by Maria Aberg", *Shakespeare Bulletin*, vol. 31, 2013, p. 95-99.

[31] While words such as she, he, brother, sister, his, and hers all have the same number of syllables and similar stresses no matter what their gender, the differences in the aural quality of these words subtly shifting the sonic landscape of Aberg's production from

Shakespeare's original. Other lines need to be more substantially changed. For example, Queen Eleanor's line
"Out on thee, rude man! Thou dost shame thy mother" (I.1.65) gets a clear feminine ending when it becomes "Out on thee, rude woman! Thou dost shame thy mother" (RSC/SM/1/2012/KJO1, *The Life and Death of King John Prompt Book (2012)*, *op. cit.*, p. 4).

[32] During Carnival celebrations and celebratory feasts in popular early modern culture, Michael Bristol writes, "It was […] customary for communities to invite a Lord of Misrule to preside over the participatory foolishness and disorderly conduct associated with certain seasonal feasts. Popular festive misrule was a travesty of the established categories of the social order that aimed at the temporary overthrow of hierarchy, domination, and privilege." It may be that *King John* never quite recovers from the festive misrule of the wedding in Act 2, but that this scene begins the continuous overthrow of hierarchy in the world of the play. See: Michael Bristol, "Theater and Popular Culture", in John D. Cox and David Scott Kastan (eds.), *A New History of Early English Drama*, New York, Columbia University Press, p. 234.

[33] Phyllis Rackin, "Patriarchal History and Female Subversion", *op. cit.*, p. 85; "Interview with the Cast of *King John*", *op. cit.*

[34] Doubling emphasises how actors are continuously "playing" different parts in the ongoing performance of history, as Brett Gamboa explains. Shakespeare strategically employed doubling to enhance thematic complexity and metatheatre in his plays. In terms of historiography, doubling draws attention to the artificiality of both historical narratives and theatrical roles. See: Brett Gamboa, *Shakespeare's Double Plays: Dramatic Economy on the Early Modern Stage*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022.

[35] While Hubert has a slightly more coherent connection to the historical record, his presence in the play is a bit confusing. He is only named in the Folio text after the scene at Angiers, which leads some to suspect that Hubert and the 'Citizen' on the wall of Angiers

are the same person. In some editions of the play and stage productions, these are the same person and in others they are not. Tobin and Lander note that Hubert "stands as a representative commoner, a servant to the crown tortured by the conflict between his conscience and his obligation to obey his sovereign" and "comes to exemplify pity" and mercy. If Hubert *is* the Citizen, he is not English, so Aberg's conflation of the characters profoundly shifts the perspective of Hubert's lines from a fully outsider's perspective to the Bastard's liminal, English one, albeit a liminality complicated by gender as well. See: J.J.M. Tobin and Jesse M. Lander, *op. cit.*, p. 14, p. 62.

[36] Peter Kirwan, "King John (RSC) @ The Swan Theatre", *The Bardathon*, University of Nottingham Blogs, 14 July 2012, blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/bardathon/2012/07/14/king-john-rsc-the-swan-theatre. Accessed 15 May 2023. The word "love" or a variation thereof appears nearly 50 times in Shakespeare's *King John*.

[37] Consider the shared lines between Richard Gloucester and Lady Anne in the wooing scene of the first act of *Richard III* or the high volume of shared lines between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Shared lines of metre create a conspiratorial atmosphere and allow actors to play around with rhythm, timing, volume, breath, and, ultimately, their audience's attention. In the early modern playhouse, where the visual aspect of theatre was not as crucial as it is for us today, aural cues were actors' most powerful tool. As Erika Lin points out, differences in the value of seating areas in the Renaissance imply that hearing the actors well was more important than visibility. See: Erika T. Lin, "Performance Practice and Theatrical Privilege: Rethinking Weimann's Concepts of *Locus* and *Platea*", *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 22, n° 3, 2006, p. 283-298. For more on the soundscape of the early modern commercial playhouse and how actors' voices sounded, see: Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999.

[38] RSC/SM/1/2012/KJO1, *The Life and Death of King John Prompt Book (2012)*, *op. cit*. p. 35, emphasis mine.

[39] Peter Kirwan, *op. cit.*

[40] For the actors' approximate ages, see: "Alex Waldmann", *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia,* Wikimedia Foundation Inc., 10 February 2024. URL. Accessed 30 August 2024 and "Pippa Nixon", *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia,* Wikimedia Foundation, Inc, 8 August 2023. URL. Accessed 30 August 2024.

[41] It bears noting that, while King John's son and mother are present in this play that deals so much with familial connections, the monarch's wife is curiously absent, effectively rendering the king romantically unattached.

[42] Peter Kirwan, *op. cit.*

[43] RSC/SM/1/2012/KJO1, *The Life and Death of King John Prompt Book (2012)*, *op. cit*., p. 50, my emphasis.

[44] For more on Hubert's "marked" appearance and the connection between his appearance and his villainy, see Jeffrey R. Wilson, "Hubert de Burgh's Mark", *Stigma in Shakespeare*, Harvard College. URL. Accessed 20 August 2024.

[45] *Ibid*., p. 49.

[46] The Prompt Book includes the following note for the end of this scene: "KJ hug B." *Ibid*., p. 50.

[47] Arthur I, Duke of Brittany was King Henry II's grandson through his fourth son, Geoffrey II, Duke of Brittany. Geoffrey (who is dead by the time the play begins) was John's older brother, so by the rules of primogeniture that were observed in the Tudor era, Arthur is undoubtedly the rightful king. However, traditions differed slightly in the Angevin Empire, and Richard I had named his brother John as his

desired heir, which resulted in the historical contentions of Shakespeare's play.

[48] RSC/SM/1/2012/KJO1, *The Life and Death of King John Prompt Book (2012)*, *op. cit*., p. 41-44.

[49] A. J. Piesse, *op. cit.*, p. 127, emphasis original.

[50] RSC/SM/1/2012/KJO1, *The Life and Death of King John Prompt Book (2012)*, *op. cit*., p. 56.

[51] *Ibid.*, p. 57.

[52] While songs in the production prior to this moment have been mostly older or more recognizable (such as "(I've Had) The Time of My Life," made famous in the film *Dirty Dancing* or Rhianna's "We Found Love"), "Civilian," by the indie band Wye Oak, was released only a year before the production opened. While the audience might have been able to (mentally) sign along to earlier songs, this moment seems intended for quiet contemplation. See: Wye Oak, "Civilian", *Merge Records on YouTube*, YouTube. URL. Accessed 3 April 2024.

[53] RSC/SM/1/2012/KJO1, *The Life and Death of King John Prompt Book (2012)*, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

[54] Particularly catching for audiences' ears are these lines from "Beggin'": "Riding high, when I was king/ I played it hard and fast, 'cause I had everything/ I walked away, but you warned me then/ But easy come, and easy go, and it would end." See: The Four Seasons, "Beggin'", Rhino Records, *YouTube.* URL. Accessed 3 May 2024.

[55] RSC/SM/1/2012/KJO1, *The Life and Death of King John Prompt Book (2012)*, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

[56] Willy Maley, "'And bloody England into England gone': Empire, Monarchy, and Nation in *King John*", in Margaret Tudeau-Clayton and

Willy Maley (eds.), *This England, That Shakespeare: New Angles on Englishness and the Bard*, Routledge, 2010, p. 49.

[57] J. J. M. Tobin and Jesse M. Lander, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

[58] Michael Gadeleto, *op. cit*., p. 4.

[59] Contemporary interest in this phrase extends beyond Shakespearean productions, as evidenced by the television miniseries called *This England* from Michael Winterbottom and Kieron Quirke. However, the series' title is explicitly referencing the phrase as it appears in John of Gaunt's famous speech in *Richard II* rather than being a reference to *King John*.

[60] *Ibid*., p. 34.

[61] Imke Lichterfeld addresses similar ideas in her recent article in this journal, which discusses women in theatre and bastardy as well as gender changes in these and various other productions of *King John* throughout Europe and North America. See: Imke Lichterfeld, "Gender changes — 'the bias of the world'?", *Shakespeare en devenir*, n° 17, 2024. URL. Accessed 29 September 2024.

[62] "Interview with the Cast of *King John*", *op. cit*., 0:53.

[63] *Ibid*., 1:08-38.

[64] The ambiguity of the eras of Aberg's and Rhode's productions contrast traditionally mediaeval productions, but also other others that reference contemporary politics more explicitly, such as Aaron Posner's 2018 *King John* at the Folger Theatre, where Brian Dykstra's King John sports an ill-fitting suit with a conspicuously long tie and leans forward across his throne in a posture instantly recognizable as a reference to the then-recently elected Donald Trump. See: Noel Sloboda, "*King John* by the Folger Theatre (review)", *Shakespeare Bulletin*, vol. 37, n° 3, 2019, p. 449-450.

[65] Andrew Dickson, "Interview: Shakespeare's 'Brexit Play': Josie Rourke on *King John*," *The Guardian*, 20 June 2016. URL. Accessed 23 April 2023.

[66] "*King John* In Rehearsal", *The Royal Shakespeare Company*, The Royal Shakespeare Company, *YouTube*, 25 September 2019. URL. Accessed 4 March 2023.

[67] In a similar move, director Aaron Posner's 2018 *King John* casts an actress as the Bastard (Kate Eastwood Norris) but the character remains male. Noel Sloboda's review notes how the actress "disappeared entirely into her part as an ambitious young man, emitting the kind of confidence and charisma befitting a descendent of the legendary Lionheart." For more on this production, see: Noel Sloboda, *op. cit.*, p. 450 and Imke Lichterfeld, *op. cit*.

[68] Gil Sutherland, "Interview: Rosie Sheehy on playing King John at the RSC", *The Stratford Herald*, 26 September 2019. URL. Accessed 7 March 2023.

[69] In Rhode's production, the Bastard was played by a young male actor, Michael Abubakar. Because of this casting, by surface appearances, some of the same dynamics of gender are present in Rhode's production as in Aberg's, but in Rhode's production, there is an added dissonance, since Sheehy is playing John as a man. Incidentally, John and the Bastard share fewer intimate moments in Rhode's production.

[70] Erika Lin has argued that that *King John* presents "competing notions of bodies as signifiers," writing that "[e]ven as the play teaches audience members to *disattend* the actor's body as theatrical signifier, then, it also underscores the notion that physical features *are* crucially significant." See: Erika T. Lin, "'Lord of thy presence': Bodies, Performance, and Audience Interpretation in Shakespeare's *King John*", in Jennifer A. Low and Nova Myhill (eds.), *Imagining the Audience in Early Modern Drama, 1558-1642*, New York,

Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 115, p. 117, my emphasis. See also: Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, New York, Routledge, 1993.

[71] According to Sheehy, in an interview with *The Stratford Herald*, the gown is not meant to signal womanhood at all but was modelled on the black Christian Siriano ball gown that actor Billy Porter wore to the Academy Awards in early 2019. See: Gil Sutherland, *op. cit*. For more on Porter's gown, see: Christian Allaire, "Billy Porter on Why He Wore a Gown, not a Tux, to the Oscars", *British Vogue*, 25 Feb. 2019. URL. Accessed 15 August 2024.

[72] Bastard and ensemble sing the poem's final lines: "Was it for this the clay grew tall? / —O what made fatuous sunbeams toil / To break earth's sleep at all?". See: Wilfred Owen, "Futility," *Poets.org*, URL, lines 12-14. Accessed 29 September 2024.

[73] Michael Gadaleto, *op. cit*., p. 34.

Quelques mots à propos de :
Elizabeth Dieterich

Elizabeth Dieterich is a Ph.D. Candidate in English Literary and Cultural Studies at Carnegie Mellon University where she is also an instructor of literature and a Research Assistant with the Center for Early Modern Print, Networks, and Performance. Her dissertation examines staged violence, race, and commercial playgoing in early modern London. Her research has recently appeared in *Shakespeare Quarterly* and in *The Four Shakespeare Folios, 1623–2023: Copy, Print, Paper, Type*.