

Where is Magna Carta in Shakespeare's *King John*?

Shakespeare's *King John* is a play about legitimising power. One of the moments in King John's reign where the legitimacy of monarchical power was tested was in the run-up to the sealing of Magna Carta. This peace settlement was an attempt to reshape the relationship between the nobility and the King and in turn, it has been understood as a tool to legitimise the power of the King. Magna Carta evokes the idea of placing limits of the power of the King. Yet, that tool of legitimacy is not discussed in the play. This paper will argue that Magna Carta is conspicuous in its absence; it is made apparent by being irrelevant. Spurred on by some of the characters in the play (including the citizens of Angers, the Bastard and Constance), the audience act as the spirit of Magna Carta. In their responses to King John they act to limit his power. Yet, Shakespeare complicates this accepted idea of Magna Carta as a legitimising tool by highlighting the weaknesses of the document, its limited application and by highlighting the weak position of the people.

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