

Redrawing the Map of Sovereignty: Insular Geopolitics and the Maritime Reimagining of England in Shakespeare's *King John*

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Abstract

While Shakespeare's *King John* has long been examined for its political and dynastic tensions, the play's geography imagination—particularly its articulation of insular territorial consciousness—has remained critically understudied. This paper argues that Shakespeare reconfigures England's geopolitical identity by positioning the sea as both a literal and symbolic boundary, transforming the island from a peripheral “corner of the world” into a secure and self-contained entity with latent claims to centrality. Departing from medieval traditions that framed England as a marginalized Edenic “island garden”, the play reimagines England's isolation as a strategic asset, leveraging maritime boundaries to assert sovereignty and insular exceptionalism. Through close analysis of key scenes, this study demonstrates how Shakespeare's England emerges not as a passive geographical outlier but as a proto-imperial polity whose “water-walled” borders redefine its place in the early modern imaginary. And by interrogating the interplay of territorial rhetoric, maritime symbolism, and national identity, the paper illuminates *King John*'s role in inaugurating a discourse of insular community that would resonate through Tudor propaganda and beyond.

Keywords

Shakespeare, King John, Insular Geopolitics, Maritime Boundaries, Community

1. Introduction

First printed in 1623 and thought to have been composed and popularized in the late sixteenth century, *King John* is widely regarded as a critical examination of early modern English nationhood. The play's plot revolves around the story of

King John, an English monarch besieged by struggles over succession, hostility from the Papacy, and the threat of formidable foreign invasions. Scholars have long focused on its deconstruction of traditional markers of identity—monarchical legitimacy, religious authority, and dynastic lineage—within the context of Elizabethan anxieties over succession and sovereignty (Gadaletto, 2018). The play’s skepticism toward institutionalized power, epitomized by John’s contested reign and the Bastard’s hybrid Anglo-French identity, positions it as a “postmodern history play” that destabilizes fixed notions of “Englishness” (Vaughan, 2003; Maley, 2010). Peter Womack argues that the drama subverts the monarch’s role as the “embodiment of the realm”, exposing the fragility of royal authority in defining national cohesion (Womack, 1992). This critical tradition foregrounds the play’s exploration of political legitimacy and cultural hybridity, framing its central question as “What is England?”—a query answered ambiguously through Bastard’s closing exhortation: “Naught shall make us rue, /If England to itself do rest but true” (5.7.117-18) (Shakespeare, 1974). This patriotic rhetoric not only emphasizes the imagined security of England as an island territory but, more crucially, underscores the civic obligation to protect national integrity and safety through territorial consciousness. Yet England’s repeated defeats throughout the play render this declaration jarring, redirecting critical focus to “the fragmented state of England and the interplay of sovereignty, nationhood, and empire” (Maley, 2010). Michael Gadaletto extends this inquiry, arguing that the play highlights the territorial ambiguity and cultural hybridity between “England” and “France”, imbuing the narrative with skepticism. England is thus framed as a “bastardized” island nation, one that acknowledges the stability of its geographic insularity while presenting its “Englishness” as a product of cultural and historical mingling (Gadaletto, 2018).

Jean Bodin of France, recognized as the foremost theorist of “sovereignty” in this period, notably omitted territoriality from his discourse. Recent scholars like Lauren Benton contend that “territorial control was a contingent feature of imperial rule rather than a stable attribute linked to sovereign jurisdiction”, with subjecthood defined by “a matrix of political and legal relationships” (Benton, 2010). Nevertheless, Island territories of Britain undeniably played a critical role in national development. For England in this era, shifts in landholding were intertwined with evolving maritime boundaries. John’s loss of French territories and retreat to England provided Elizabethan audiences with a geographic imaginary rooted in insular distinctiveness. Though the Angevin Empire historically spanned both sides of the English Channel, *King John* deliberately constructs a monarch confined solely to British island—a narrative misaligned with Angevin territorial ambitions but resonant with the Tudor reality of Elizabeth I’s reign. This framing became foundational to the territorial consciousness of an emerging early modern English polity, profoundly shaping the play’s patriotic ethos.

While the territorial vision of the play neglects the military independence of Scotland and Ireland, it creates a rhetoric of a unified British island. This “carto-

graphic misprision” not only fuels the play’s passionate patriotic rhetoric but also lays the foundation for subsequent imaginings of Britain as an insular national community. This section utilizes the concept of territoriality to explore how Shakespeare, through the story of a medieval “landless king” who repeatedly surrenders dominion, constructs an imagination of an “island protected by the sea”. How is this territorial vision gradually articulated in the play, and does it solve the question of “What is England?” in the geographic sphere?

2. “This Fair Island”: The Cartographic Imagination of England

From its opening act, *King John* systematically constructs England as a geopolitically isolated insular entity, where maritime boundaries simultaneously segregate and sanctify the realm as a beautiful, isolated, and secure island. This territorial mythology is inaugurated through Chatillion’s diplomatic confrontation with King John. Hailing the monarch as “The borrowed majesty, of England here” (1.1.4), the French envoy demands the surrender of “this fair island and the territories—/Ireland, Poitiers, Anjou, Touraine, Maine” (1.1.9-11) in the name of Arthur Plantagenet’s legitimate succession claims. The ensuing war declaration inextricably binds territorial possession to dynastic legitimacy, framing sovereignty as a spatial practice. This diplomatic discourse juridically conflates hereditary entitlement with territorial sovereignty, while demarcating the spatial parameters through insular-territorial distinction from overseas possessions. This geopolitical calculus is mirrored in the Bastard’s subplot—a structural parallelism revealing the play’s core thesis. When Philip Faulconbridge loses his land inheritance due to bastardy, Shakespeare foregrounds the material consequences of disrupted territorial continuity: the forfeiture of “five hundred pounds a year” (1.1.70) becomes synecdochic of England’s broader anxiety over fractured succession. Crucially, the Bastard’s birth is attributed to maritime separation—“Large lengths of seas and shores/Between my father and my mother lay” (1.1.105-106). These two ostensibly disparate narrative threads not only juridically interlace territorial claims with hereditary entitlement, but more fundamentally crystallize the cartographic consciousness of Britain as a political community—a maritime-bordered picturesque archipelago whose ontological differentiation from continental Europe is perpetually reinscribed through thalassographic demarcation.

The territorial claims related to British archipelagic formations and their associated thalassocratic demarcations are discursively repeated throughout the *King John*. The second act of the play consolidates England’s insular territorial imagination through the paradoxical negotiation of maritime borders. In Act 2, Scene 1 beneath the walls of Angiers, King Philip of France repeats Arthur’s claim to “this fair island and the territories” (2.1.152), extending his demands to Continental holdings. However, the conflict reaches its peak in a marital alliance brokered by the Citizen: the union of Blanche of Castile with Louis the Dauphin ostensibly neutralizes the hostilities between England and France. John’s offer of “[Anjou]

and fair Touraine, Maine, Poitiers/And all that we upon this side the sea” (2.1.487-88) as dowry—later refined to five Continental provinces (2.1.527-28)—carries out a cartographic trick. By rhetorically giving up Continental territories while focusing on the “fair island”, Shakespeare’s John differs radically from his historical counterpart, creating a strange territorial imagination that is alien to the 13th-century Angevin realities.

King John’s literary construction of voluntarily relinquishing continental interests and the creator of the “fair island” formed a “self-shaping” of island sovereignty in Shakespeare’s era, which was a fundamental deviation from the monarch’s historical practice in the 13th century. King John, this third Angevin king showed a persistent aspiration for continental possessions, which contradicts the dramatized insular territorial imagination. Born in 1167 as the youngest son of Henry II, John inherited limited domains due to the territorial allocations made to his elder brothers Henry, Richard, and Geoffrey before their father’s death—thus earning the nickname “John Lackland” (Hollister, 1961). The succession crisis following the childless death of Richard the Lionheart in 1199 involved only Arthur, the son of Geoffrey, but historical records differ from Shakespeare’s account of all the Angevin territorial consolidation under English rule. The Angevin dynasty made continuous efforts to consolidate its European territorial possessions, incurring considerable fiscal and military expenses that led to the systemic crises later reflected in *Magna Carta* (1215). Academic research attributes the fiscal crises that culminated in *Magna Carta* to the excessive military expenditures of Henry II and Richard I on continental defense and Crusader campaigns. Henry II’s attempt to demarcate the boundaries of Normandy through physical earthworks foreshadowed later territorial disputes. *Chronicles* frequently referred to by Shakespeare document that John’s seventeen-year reign was characterized by repeated cross-Channel military campaigns, including pre-coronation manoeuvres in 1199 to reclaim Angevin towns from his nephew. After his coronation in June 1199, John launched Norman expeditions demanding the restoration of Anjou, Maine, Poitiers, Touraine, and Brittany—campaigns recorded in 1201, 1203, and 1206, before continental defeats and domestic revolts ended his overseas ventures after 1213. The dramatic territorial “dowry” stands in sharp contrast to historical records (Holinshed, 2006). The conspicuous prominence of *Chronicles* in Shakespearean dramaturgy raises critical inquiry: why does *King John* transform the historically Francophile monarch into a willing relinquisher of ancestral continental domains, while amplifying Anglo-French rhetorical insistence on England’s “fair isle”?

“This Fair Island”, this insular description, though geographically appropriate, contains profound cultural sediment. Lynn Staley’s pioneering analysis identifies a persistent theme in England’s textual tradition—the paradoxical construction of Britain as a fertile and fair island that is simultaneously isolated from yet spiritually integrated with continental Europe (Staley, 2012). When emphasizing the imagery of “the Island Garden”, Lynn traces the narrative origin to Gildas’ 6th-cen-

tury *De Excidio Britonum*. By linking the isolated geographical setting of the island to the Garden of Eden, Gildas condemns the stubbornly rebellious English people for losing this paradisiacal realm due to their sins (Staley, 2012). In the 8th century, Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* perpetuated this insular geographic imagination, which was later mythologized through Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1136). Geoffrey's pseudo-history recast Britain as Albion—a Trojan-refugee sanctuary—while Ranulf Higden's 14th-century *Polychronicon* cartography visually codified England's geopolitical isolation. The manuscript's accompanying world map depicts Britain as a vermilion isle perched at the edge of the known world—encircled by the sea and separated from continental Europe by narrow waters, crystallizing its imagined “isolated” status within medieval geopolitical discourse.

In *King John*, this “Fair Island” is consistently referred to as “England” throughout the play. The terms “England” and “English” appear more frequently here than in any other Shakespearean drama—40 and 7 instances respectively—with no mentions of “Scotland”, “Wales”, or “Britannia”, while “Ireland” occurs merely twice. Notably, Shakespeare only began distinguishing between “Britannia” and “England” in his late romances (Escobedo, 2008). The play's exclusive use of “England” to represent the entire island constitutes a geographical imaginary that diverges from both King John's historical realm and Tudor-era territorial realities. As recorded in the *Chronicles*, territorial disputes with the Scottish monarch formed part of John's pre-coronation agenda (Holinshed, 2006). Ultimately, while the play's insular imagery aligns with the enduring narrative trope of Britain's “fair” isolation, it contradicts actual historical and geopolitical configurations. Paradoxically, this distortion perfectly echoes Tudor propaganda framing England as a unified, isolated, and sacrosanct island realm.

The geospatial conception of England's island territories, as portrayed in Shakespeare's *King John*, is not solely represented in traditional literary works, but also documented in official records following the Tudor Reformation. The 1532 *Act for the Conditional Restraint of Annates* explicitly refers to “throughout this said realm, and all other the dominions or territories belonging or appertaining thereunto,” while designating its authority to “said Sovereign Lord, his heirs of successors, kings of England, or any of his or their spiritual or lay subjects, or this his realm” (Bray, 1994). Here, the term “realm” dominates, with “territories” framed as subordinate to the realm. The 1533 *Act in Restraint of Appeals* further declares: “Where by divers sundry old authentic histories and chronicles it is manifestly declared and expressed that this realm of England is an empire, and so hath been accepted in the world governed by one supreme head and king, having the dignity and royal estate of the imperial crown of the same” (Bray, 1994). These legal documents formalized the conceptualization of England's significance to the Tudor dynasty and defined the relationship between royal authority and territorial dominion. A realm as a political community was described as “its particularly enduring and manifest existence as a well-established power over a considerable ter-

ritory of land and possibly also sea expanse” (Weber, 1978). While these formulations in Tudor dynasty fundamentally differ from modern notions of territorial sovereignty, they nevertheless established geographical parameters for the English realm and articulated the monarch’s jurisdictional claims within these demarcated spaces. The importance of sea and island-related cognition in this formation process is indisputable.

The loss of Calais in 1558 signified the definite loss of all Tudor continental European territories, making insularity an imposed geopolitical reality. As Fernand Braudel noted, between 1453 and 1558, England imperceptibly transformed into an island—a discrete spatial entity disconnected from the Continent (Braudel, 1992). By the late 16th century, amid political upheavals resulting from the Reformation on the European mainland—particularly in France—and renewed threats of invasion such as the Spanish Armada, England’s insular identity no longer derived prestige from affiliation with a broader European community. Instead, its “isolated island status” was reimagined as a source of tranquility and order. Shakespeare’s depiction of the “fair island” in *King John* offered a historiographical reconfiguration that transformed the Tudors’ reluctant retreat into insularity into a mythologized act of proactive self-preservation. When *King John* withdraws from continental conflicts to England—mirroring the Tudor dynasty’s geopolitical stance during Shakespeare’s creative period—the play shows how territorial self-awareness forged the foundational identity of the English polity. Thus, Shakespeare’s anachronistic territorial imagination, although divorced from historical accuracy, poetically aligned with Tudor propaganda that recast enforced isolation as divinely ordained insular exceptionalism.

3. The Water-Walled Island Fortress and the Sea

In Act II, Lymoges, Duke of Austria—who stands accused of murdering Richard the Lionheart—pledges to assist Arthur in reclaiming the throne and delivers an elaborate geographical exposition of England as an island.

Together with that pale, that white-fac’d shore,
Whose foot spums back the ocean’s roaring tides
And coops from other lands her islanders,
Even till that England, hedg’d in with the main,
That water-walled bulwark, still secure
And confident from foreign purposes.
Even till that utmost corner of the west
Salute thee for her king; till then, fair boy,
Will I not think of home, but follow arms. (2.1.23-31)

This passage echoes John of Gaunt’s iconic speech in *Richard II*, exemplifying Shakespeare’s recurrent geographical imagination of England as an island whose maritime environs engendered a geopolitical fantasy of security, thereby accentuating its perceived separation from continental territories. The “white-fac’d shore” refers specifically to the chalk cliffs of southeastern England, which—alongside

the encircling sea—are portrayed as shielding the island’s inhabitants from external intrusions. The term “coops” here connotes a protective segregation, while the entire island is envisioned as a “water-walled bulwark”—a fortress where the sea transforms from a permeable passageway into impregnable ramparts. This metaphor politically repositions the ocean, reflecting 16th-century England’s dual recognition of the sea’s natural-strategic significance and its ideological role in national identity formation. The marine sphere becomes an extension of territorial sovereignty, intertwining the safety of the realm with the Crown’s jurisdictional authority. The militarized lexicon applied to the island and its surrounding waters reconfigures the medieval “garden” trope into a Reformation-era “fortress”—a geopolitical construct safeguarded not by divine providence but by the “the ocean’s roaring tides”. Notably, the conceptualization of the sea itself as constituent territory finds oblique historical precedent in maritime ordinances, such as the apocryphal “striking of the sail” edict purportedly decreed by King John in 1201, which asserted royal prerogative over coastal waters (Sobecki, 2008). Shakespeare’s synthesis of natural imagery and martial rhetoric thus crystallizes how Tudor England reimagined its insular geography as both physical stronghold and ideological talisman against continental chaos.

The conceptualization of “the sea as England’s defensive wall” constitutes a strategic reworking of Gildas’ “Island Garden”, proliferating in political pamphlets following the Hundred Years’ War. The mid-15th-century *Libelle of Englyshe Polycye*, a seminal medieval political poem, politicizes the maritime sphere by framing England’s encircling seas as natural walls that must be defended at all costs (1092-7) (Moleyns, 1926). Contemporaneously, John Capgrave’s 1453 *Liber de Illustribus Henricis* reinforces this trope, asserting: “As the ancients said, the sea is England’s wall” (Dictum est ab antiquis, quod murus Angliae mare sit) (Sobecki, 2008). Both texts, however, imbue this metaphor with existential urgency, demanding perpetual vigilance against “hostile neighbors” threatening to breach these aqueous fortifications. Compared to England’s geopolitical dilemmas during the Hundred Years’ War, late 16th-century insular border anxieties grew more acute. In the Elizabethan comedy *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, even a medieval conjurer fantasizes about constructing a bronze defensive wall around England’s shores. The literal ramparts in question are those of Angiers in Act II, where Bastard mocks the besieged citizens’ reliance on their walls against Anglo-French cannons charged with fiery ordinance capable of reducing their trusted battlements to dust (2.1.381-4). Though the citizens defiantly proclaim “The sea enraged is not half so deaf” (2.1.452), they ultimately capitulate, opening their gates to propose a marital truce that resolves the succession crisis. The actual walls—the walls of Angiers, appear to be far less stable than the walls of the sea, even if the actual function of the sea as a wall is questioned. Regardless of the practical defensibility of a “water-walled bulwark,” the sea becomes an ideological construct within English nationalist discourse—reimagined as the symbolic ramparts of an insular fortress, weaponizing maritime boundaries against foreign incursions.

The sea, functioning as this aqueous wall, shapes the territorial boundaries of England as a communal polity. In the play, this border emerges through King John's voluntary relinquishment of French territories to secure a marital alliance. Though Bastard derides it as a "mad composition" (2.1.561), he concedes both parties gain their desired "commodity" (2.1.575-99)—for John, this "commodity" lies in consolidating his English territorial claims to prevent Arthur, backed by France, from usurping his entire dominion. Faced with a choice between the "beautiful island" and continental holdings, John opts for England. Subsequently, the play conflates John's retreat into insularity with the very concept of England itself, imbuing it with sacrality. The sea, as boundary, both enables and reinforces this imagined geographical containment.

King John's assertion of territorial sovereignty crystallizes in his confrontation with Pandulph, the papal legate. Scholars often note Shakespeare's artistic compression of historical timelines in *King John*, merging Arthur's dynastic conflict with John's papal struggle (Erskine-Hill, 1996), yet rarely acknowledge how the latter—serving as the play's pivotal turn—intensifies the legal dimensions of monarchical authority and early modern statehood. During the wedding feast in Scene 1 of Act III, when Pandulph demands Stephen Langton's installation as Archbishop of Canterbury, John's terse rebuttals carry profound implications. First, he rejects papal jurisdiction: "What earthly name to interrogatories/Can task the free breath of a sacred king?" (3.1.147-148). Second, he denies Rome's right to levy taxes within his "dominions" (3.1.154). Finally, he declares his God-given prerogative as "But as we, under [God], are supreme head, /So under Him that great supremacy, /Where we do reign, we will alone uphold" (3.1.155-157). John's self-styling as "sacred king" and "great supremacy" directly evokes Henry VIII's 1534 title "Supreme Head of the Church of England" and Elizabeth I's 1559 designation as "Supreme Governor". Contextualizing this, Stuart Elden interprets John here as proto-Reformation reformer and incipient Protestant (Elden, 2018). Crucially, John's identification with England becomes absolute—his words issue "from the mouth of England" (3.1.152)—as he rejects papal tithes, asserting political authority to exercise power unimpeded by external forces within England's insular territory. This ideological thread traces to medieval maxims like Innocent III's "rex est imperator in regno suo" ("a king is emperor in his own realm") and King John's purported claim that "regnum Anglicanum quasi imperio adaequetur" ("the English kingdom equals an empire"). By equating kingship with England itself, John's body politic becomes territorial embodiment. This conflation extends beyond John: in Act III Scene 4, the French King acknowledges John's military acumen as "bloody England into England gone" (3.4.8), begrudgingly admitting, "I may not...grudge/One syllable from England's praise" (3.4.14-15). Shakespeare thus dramatizes how insular territory becomes the irreducible substrate of sovereign identity—a Reformation-era recalibration of kingship as geographically circumscribed sacral authority.

In Act III of *King John*, as the narrative progresses following John's renuncia-

tion of French territories, England evolves from a “fair Island” into a territorialized embodiment of sacralized kingship. This conceptual integration not only mirrors the Tudor geopolitical predicament after the loss of Calais but also elevates monarchical authority to a sanctified expression of insular sovereignty during John’s confrontation with Pandulph. The play’s treatment of divine kingship—tethered to territorial integrity—resonates with Elizabethan anxieties over Catholic threats from continental Europe. The sea’s militarized significance resurfaces when French forces are thwarted “by a roaring tempest on the flood, /A whole armado of convicted sail /Is scattered and disjoin’d from fellowship” (3.4.1-3), an episode evocative for audiences of England’s 1588 deliverance from the Spanish Armada, harried by English ships and ultimately scattered by fierce storms. And Constance’s lament that the wedding day is “cursed” and “unnatural”, sparing sailors “But on this day let seamen fear no wrack” (3.1.92), further sacralizes the sea as both divine arbiter and militarized boundary—a paradoxical synthesis of Gildas’ “Island Garden” mysticism and Tudor strategic pragmatism.

By framing England as a “water-walled island fortress,” *King John* intertwines territorial limits with the encircling sea. Adam McKeown argues that under Henry VIII, the “island fortress” imagery “it changed England spatially by projecting a consolidated country organized around military needs and confined physically by military infrastructure” (McKeown, 2018). Building on this tradition, Elizabethan England expanded its naval militarization, redefining itself as a maritime bulwark. Against this backdrop, *King John* dramatizes kingship as territorially coextensive with the island, deploying the “water-walled” metaphor to sanctify both the realm and its monarch. Yet the play’s ambivalent conclusion—John’s demise juxtaposed with the Bastard’s rousing paean to an “invincible England”—raises critical questions: Is *King John* a “problem play” interrogating sovereignty’s fragility, or a proto-patriotic text mythologizing insular exceptionalism? The answer lies in its ideological duality: the sea, as both sacred moat and strategic frontier, enables Shakespeare to simultaneously critique and consecrate Tudor territorial nationalism.

4. From “The Utmost Corner of the West” to “the Unconquerable Isle”

In the play’s closing moments, as King John succumbs to poison and Prince Henry ascends under noble assent, Bastard delivers a galvanizing oration:

O, let us pay the time but needful woe,
 Since it hath been beforehand with our griefs.
 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. Nought shall make us rue,
 If England to itself do rest but true. (5.7.110-18)

This speech transfigures England from a “water-walled fortress” into an “unconquerable isle”—a sovereign entity defiantly occupying the “utmost corner of the west” (2.1.29). The Bastard’s rhetoric synthesizes insular geography and nationalist resolve, framing England’s survival not through military victory but through fidelity to its territorialized identity. His closing oration envisions a unified political community bound by shared inhabitation of a sea-bounded island, a vision scholars contextualize within medieval cosmography: influenced by biblical quadripartite world models, England emerges as the fourth “corner”, ideologically opposed to the other three. This symbolic geography evolves within the play: England, once imagined as a peripheral “utmost corner of the west” in Duke Lymoges’ earlier declaration, becomes a maritime center besieged by all the world (5.7.81). The Bastard’s patriotic rhetoric transcends mere celebration of England’s beauty; it marks a transformative self-identification, reconfiguring the island from a marginal outpost into a latent epicenter of global significance. The sea, once a divine rampart, now becomes the horizon of exceptionalism—an ideological moat separating England’s “true” self from continental corruption. *King John* ultimately stages the birth of England’s insular myth: an island eternally unconquered because perpetually self-renewing.

As the final act of the play commences, it unfolds a politically charged scene: King John, besieged by internal and external crises, surrenders his crown to Pandulph, the papal legate, in a desperate bid for stability, only to reclaim it as the Pope’s vassal. “Thus have I yielded up into your hand/The circle of my glory.” (5.1.1-2), John declares, to which Pandulph responds, “Take again /From this my hand, as holding of the Pope, /Your sovereign greatness and authority.” (5.1.2-3). Shakespeare underscores the performative brevity of this transfer by structuring the exchange within a shared verse line. Yet for Shakespeare’s 16th-century audience—steeped in post-Reformation sensibilities—this subordination of the English crown to papal authority would have resonated as both anachronistic and humiliating. Notably, John Bale’s 1538 play *King Johan* offers a more defiant iteration: “my sceptre I gaue vp latelye/To the pope of Rome, whych hath no tittle good/Of iurisdycyon, but of vsurpacyon onlye./And now to the, lorde, I woulde resygne vp gladlye/Both my crowne and lyfe; for thyne owne ryght it is” (2.2.2058-2063) (Bale, 1969). A comparative analysis of the two passages reveals that Shakespeare’s John prioritizes political expediency over religious orthodoxy when surrendering to papal authority. Nevertheless, Pandulph fails to withdraw French forces as promised; instead, England’s insular defenses—its sea and Bastard’s armies—repel Louis’ invasion, thwarting his marital claim to the throne. The act reaches its climax with a chorus of voices reaffirming the spatial centrality of the island to England’s communal identity, as exemplified by the Bastard’s rallying cry: “Nought shall make us rue, /If England to itself do rest but true. (5.7.117-18). Here, Shakespeare goes beyond Bale’s divine-right absolutism and creates instead a proto-nationalist vision in which the island itself—not dynastic divinity—anchors England’s identity. The “imagined community” comes together not through

sacramental kingship but through territorial isolation and collective loyalty, redefining sovereignty as geographically limited self-fidelity.

In Act V, England transforms from the European imaginary's "utmost corner of the west" into an "unconquerable" nation. Simultaneously, through Philip the Bastard's rhetoric, it crystallizes an early modern territorialized vision of nationhood rooted in the land itself. When nobles rebel against John following Arthur's death, Salisbury still identifies as "the sons and children of this isle" (5.2.25). Hubert, questioned by Bastard—"What art thou?" (5.6.2)—instantly replies, "Of the part of England" (5.6.3). Persuaded by Melune's dying words, Salisbury pledges the nobles will "And calmly run on in obedience/Even to our ocean, to our great King John." (5.4.56-57). These lines reconstitute England's communal identity by integrating insular geography with monarchic symbolism. The ocean and the island are not just territorial markers but manifestations of sovereignty itself. Neither the English nobility nor Louis now battles for a transcendent "sacred Christian commonwealth"; their conflicts serve national self-interest, forging a territorially embodied sovereign—a king whose sanctity stems not merely from divine right but from symbolic unity with the land. This early modern political theology reaches its climax when Bastard urges the newly crowned Henry III: "And happily may your sweet self put on/The lineal state and glory of the land!" (5.7.101-102). Here, England becomes an insular entirety: its inhabitants swear allegiance not to a universal Christendom but to a monarch equated with the sea-encircled island itself. Bloodline succession persists, yet its legitimacy now flows through the soil of the realm rather than the sacraments of Rome.

In Elizabethan England, publications perpetuated classical conceptions of the nation as a peripheral world's edge while transmuting this imagery into a vision of a sacred maritime isle. Josephine Waters Bennett notes that "ancient notions about Great Britain as another world beyond the end of the earth caught the fancy of the Elizabethans" (Bennett, 1956). Renaissance receptions of classical texts framed Britain as Virgil's "penitus toto divisos orbe Britannos" ("Britons wholly separated from the world") or Horace's "in ultimos orbis" ("at the world's farthest bounds") (Bennett, 1956). This marginalizing rhetoric intensified in Arthur Golding's 1587 translation of Solinus' third-century *Polyhistor*, which declared that the coast of Gaul was once deemed the world's end, but Britain's vastness nearly merits the name of another world. That same year, John Harison's preface to Holinshed's *Chronicles* reinforced this ambiguity in "Description of Britaine": "It is not certeine vnto which portion of the earth our Ilands, and Thule, with sundrie the like scattered in the north seas should be ascribed, because they [the ancients] excluded them...from the rest of the whole earth" (Bennett, 1956).

Geographical isolation, coupled with a century of relative domestic peace, furnished England with a new ethno-geographical imaginary—an Edenic "island garden". This peripherality now strategically echoed Gildas' insular paradise, grafting biblical utopianism onto territorial exceptionalism. Post-Reformation England, despite internal and external crises, appeared comparably stable against

war-torn continental Europe. Elizabeth's reign, though fraught with challenges, maintained relative tranquility—a precious respite after centuries of conflict: the Hundred Years' War with France and the Wars of the Roses remained visceral cultural memories. A century of peace, crowned by the 1588 defeat of Spain, catalyzed England's reimagining of its "world's edge" status as a self-contained microcosm distinct from the Continent. By William Blake's era, this insular exceptionalism would evolve into millenarian ambition: "Till we have built Jerusalem/In England's green and pleasant Land" (Blake, 2008).

In Bastard's impassioned closing speech, *King John* ultimately constructs an early modern territorial imaginary of the English nation-state. As Virginia Mason Vaughan observes: "Shakespeare's *King John* presents two Englands: a medieval world which takes its identity from its hereditary rulers, and a community whose authority is ultimately derived from the people" (Vaughan, 2003). And in truth, the play disentangles kingship from the medieval "sacred Christian commonwealth," preserving dynastic legitimacy while binding monarchic authority to sacred territory. Through the sanctified insular geography of the "island nation," this imagined community acquires latent sacrality, endowing its inhabitants with a cohesive communal identity.

5. Conclusion

Shakespeare's geographical imagination in *King John*—predicated on the dialectics of insularity and maritime boundaries—articulates England as a geopolitically bounded entity, distinct from the territorial instabilities pervade the Tudor dynasty. Whereas the latter dramatizes the vulnerabilities of porous continental frontiers, *King John* reframes the ocean as both a natural fortification and an ideological apparatus, securing the realm's sovereignty through its sea liminality. By reconfiguring the island as a water-walled imperium, Shakespeare performatively disentangles England from its continental dependencies, reconstituting it as an autonomous polity whose territorial integrity is coterminous with its sovereign identity. This conceptual innovation not only destabilizes medieval universalist frameworks but also establishes a discursive blueprint for subsequent Jacobean dramatizations of insularity. Thus, *King John* emerges as a textual crucible wherein early modern England's emergent nationalism is spatially codified, transforming geographical peripherality into the ideological bedrock of an incipient imperial imaginary.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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