King John’s Role In Medieval History And Magna Carta

Medieval history has been irrevocably influenced by King John’s hand in numerous ways not restricted to the labels of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ in a traditional sense of the words. These lasting influences are threefold, 1) John’s role in the institution of the Magna Carta, 2) John’s political failings in terms of land and relationship loss and, 3) John’s legacy of being the ‘Worst English King’. It is for these reasons that King John’s role in Medieval history was so impactful and continued into the modern.

The Magna Carta is King John’s most significant contribution to Medieval history because it was the reason for the monarchical reformation that allowed England to plunge into the democratic renaissance and form the foundation for constitutions to come around the world. In a time of an absolute monarchy, the medieval period was largely a hereditary autocracy in which there was little accountability for authoritarian leaders such as King John and his predecessors. This meant they had the prerogative to institute whatever decrees and orders they wished, including tax rates, the verdicts of justice in court, and military decisions. The reason King John was so instrumental in the lasting impact of the Magna Carta is not that he allowed it to pass, because he had no intention of respecting its clauses, but because if he had not aggravated the barons as much as he did then they would not have engaged him in the parley that led to the proposal of the original Magna Carta that was meant to control King Johns ultimate power. This is why when the Magna Carta was proposed to King John at Runnymede he was so appalled by it and what it entailed because it held a proclamation that no more would a monarch have absolute control of England with no accountability for the violation of previously settled rights and regulations. This litigation was by no means extended to most of the population who labored and farmed the land, i.e. the peasants, and should not be mistaken as democratic in its own essence but merely as a vessel from which modern democracy was established. An example of this would be the institution of early parliament made of barons and high church officials in the thirteenth century to further control the King's power. They were given the right to give consent to new laws and tax rates. This new allowance, in some cases, even made it possible for burgesses and lower-class knights to give their opinion as well. With each revision becoming more and more democratic it eventually became the basis for many legal documents worldwide, including the US constitution, and bringing with that its famed reputation for being the first document looking to free peasants. The Magna Carta has been crucial in the development and reintroduction of democracy in the world and, thus, is King Johns's most valuable contribution to the Medieval era even if it was inadvertent.

King John’s disastrous diplomatic escapades and subsequent loss of Angevin Dynasty land in France was a defining aspect of his reign and thus shaped the future of England. At its zenith, under the rule of Henry II, the Plantagenet/Angevin empire covered all of England, a small portion of Ireland, and over half of France. After the end of John’s reign all that remained was England, Ireland, and two provinces of France; Gascony and parts of Poitou. Ill-fated and cataclysmic this casualty of his rain permanently tarnished his reputation, commented on by Matthew Paris in a 13th-century chronicle of English History; ‘Owing to his slothfulness, he lost Normandy and, moreover, seemed eager to lose the kingdom of England or destroy it.’ While harsh, these words reflected the severity of his actions- ruling part of France effectively prevented France from gaining too much power and attacking England as well as providing

economic benefits and peoples. This loss of land spouted from John’s failed attempt at an alliance. In 1200 he made a treaty with King Phillip II of France to prevent further war on both their parts, an aspect of this forced John to break alliances with Count Baldwin of Flanders and Renaud of Boulogne to accept Phillip as the sole overlord of his French holdings. This unpopular treaty lasted until King John annulled his marriage and instead married 12-year-old Isabella of Angouleme (almost 22 years his junior) who was already betrothed to a powerful French noble who then asked for justice but John refused to appear in the French court, therefore, breaking the allegiance between England and France. After this disaster, John turned his attention to bureaucracy in his state and became mesmerized by his power. This led him to make a fatal mistake. In 1205 he interfered with the election of the new Archbishop of Canterbury, this brought the displeasure of the most powerful man in all of Europe at that time, the Pope, and caused him to ban church and religious services from going forth in England for six years, in addition to excommunicating John. Despite his treaty in 1213 with the pope, the damage John had caused was irreversible. In losing ancestral land and alienating alliances and connections, the end of King John’s reign completely contrasted the commencement as England suffered power loss and an economic fallback that vastly changed the following years of the Medieval period.

King John’s legacy will always be his label of the worst king in English history and it is his constant portrayal as the villain that truly made an impact on Medieval history. Most sources used to find information about King John from the medieval period are negatively biased leading one to assume that he was in fact deserving of his title of the worst king in England. Such moments in his reign such as the loss of the Plantagenet land in France as well as the need for the Magna Carta certainly add substance to this claim, however, sources tend not to focus as much on his competency as ruler (though this was overshadowed by his cruelness and his penchant for taxation) and more on his shortcomings. So why was he for so long depicted as the ultimate villain in a medieval setting? Because of his cruelty and the way he approached dealing with those who stood in his way. 'A lot of very effective medieval kings are cruel and inspire fear, but he hasn't inspired trust. For people to trust a king and fear him is essential but people don't trust him.” This was so intelligently posed in a BBC article about his lasting reputation and so accurately shows why he is so vilified. King John had no problem double-crossing and stepping on toes to acquire what he wanted, two examples of this being his marrying of Isabella of Angouleme and consequent upsetting of his alliance with King Phillip II of France, and he's going behind the backs of the barons to beg that the pope nullify the Magna Carta. As stated by the BBC, the people wanted someone who was fearsome and yet trustworthy, neither which John possessed, he was more conniving and calculating. Therefore he was made into this villain to appease the people’s need to have someone to blame for the state of life and to contrast his older brother Richard’s ‘heroism’ that caused him to lead the crusades- a very popular war. These depictions are emphasized by pop culture and literature, such as Disney’s 1973 movie Robin Hood which displays the character Prince John as a childish and runty anthropomorphic lion living in the shadow of his older brother Richard the Lionheart the brave crusader. These portrayals are baseless and misinterpret fact in favor of a classic depiction of storybook black and white villains and heroes when the subject was more morally grey in today's terms. King John’s inability to trust and possession of characteristics typically attributed to ‘bad’ people is what made an impact on the Medieval era- the people of England received their storybook villain served up on a silver plate ready to be blamed for all their woes and King John went down in history as the worst king of England.

Thus, King John’s role in Medieval history was extensive due to his eventful reign. His

overseeing of the establishment of the Magna Carta, loss of relationships and land due to political fallacy on his part, and his lasting legacy are all defining factors of not only his impact on the Medieval era but also in modern-day perceptions of him- true or not. Whether or not it was a negative or positive reign overall, King John was an important monarch in history because of his shaping of the Medieval world and, now, the modern.