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“With mine own tears I wash away my balm”: The King’s two bodies in Shakespeare’s Richard II and King Lear

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to delineate the representation of kingship in Tudor and Stuart England and its articulation in Shakespeare’s political drama, through the examples of *Richard II* (1599) and *King Lear* (1606), two illustrative plays of the respective eras. Conceived of as two-bodied, the sovereign is, from early medieval times, positioned in an uneasy liminal state whereby his natural body is also the incarnation of the mystical concept of the everlasting Body politic. Anxieties over this seemingly unbreakable continuity of mystical kingship become nonetheless palpable as Queen Elizabeth I lies dying, leaving no heir to the throne of England. The first Stuart monarch hence reinforces the doctrine of The Divine Right of Kings by confidently advancing the unique precedence of godhead over manhood in the monarch. Set in this context, Shakespeare’s two political figures question the validity of the king’s impregnable nature as they grapple with their human condition exposed to all mortal ills. When Richard II’s “tears wash away (his) balm” and his meta-physiological body withal, Shakespeare exposes the frailties underneath the fiction of the monarch’s two-bodied nature parodied in *King Lear* as “every inch a king”.

*There is such divinity doth hedge a king
That treason can but peep to what it would,
Acts little of his will.
W. Shakespeare, Hamlet (IV. 5. 124-126)*

From the early Middle Ages in England, with the reign of the last Anglo-Saxon ruler Edward the Confessor (1042-1066) famous for his thaumaturgical powers, the body of the king is placed at the centre of sacred kingship¹. Natural and mystical, mortal and immortal, immanent and transcendent, the body of the sovereign is positioned in a liminal and uneasy state, half way between manhood and godhead. In order for them to enhance this second aspect of their body, that immortal and divine one, the monarchs exploit several fields, from art to doctrine. More than any others in British history, the Tudor and Stuart monarchs were eager to give precedence to their godhead over manhood, as they were unique in consolidating royal absolutism, started with Henry VIII's Act of Supremacy in 1534 by which he became Head of State and Church². The burden of immortality-within mortality is all the more peculiar and disturbing in Shakespeare's age as queen Elizabeth lay dying leaving no heir to the throne of England, breaking thereby the seamless transition of Tudor power that had spun over a century. The *end* of a reign with no legacy of power to royal lineage is as anxiety-producing a situation as the *beginning* of a reign; and James VI of Scotland, invested now as King of England after Elizabeth's death on March 24th 1603, had to make up for the feeling of uneasiness dynastic discontinuity created among people, by not only asserting his legitimacy as a rightful heir to the throne of England but also by reinforcing the mystique of kingship.

¹ On Edward the Confessor's healing powers, in England and in Normandy, see Frank Barlow ed., *The Life of King Edward Who Rests at Westminster*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992, lxxi-lxxii.

² On the Act of Supremacy, see Roger Lockyer, *Tudor and Stuart Britain, 1485-1714* (Edinburgh, Pearson Education, 2005), p. 56-62. On royal absolutism in Sixteenth century England in comparison with other periods, see A. D. Nuttall, *Shakespeare the Thinker* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 140-141.

Against the background of political theology promoted in Tudor and Stuart England, this study aims at delineating the correspondences between the representations of the king’s two-bodies in doctrine and art and their articulations in Shakespeare’s political tragedies through the examples of *Richard II* (1599) and *King Lear* (1606). Written respectively in the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, the two plays address the issue of the king’s body in a way that both, complies with and subverts tradition, as the two eponymous heroes explore and come to terms with their human frailties underneath the mystical cloak of impregnability.

1. The juridical doctrine of The King’s two bodies

“I am but one body naturally considered, though I am by God’s permission a Body Politic to govern”: so Queen Elizabeth declared in her accession speech, reflecting the medieval political theory reinforced by law under her father³. In this theory, the king is conceived of as two-bodied, carrying in and through his mortal body the immortal concept of kingship; incarnating in his flesh the mystical concept of the ever-lasting Body Politic. In England, the famous proverb “the king is dead, long live the King!” was initially declaimed in French upon the death of Henry III in 1272, because his son Edward I was fighting in the crusades, hence physically absent. The declaration meant to appease the anxiety of the people regarding the empty throne, stressing the fact that if the king dies physically he still survives in his heir. Edward’s accession to the throne was therefore automatic and he did not wait until 1274, year of his effective coronation, to assume his monarchical role⁴. The capital letter in the second word “King” of the famous expression points at that other dimension of the natural body of the king: its mysticism, its abstract-like and “meta-physiological” qualities, beyond illness and death : the

³ Susan Brigden, *New Worlds, Lost Worlds: The Rule of the Tudors 1485-1603* (London, Penguin, 2000), p.214.

⁴ Ernest H. Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies. A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 329.

body that never dies⁵. In his seminal work *The King's Two Bodies. A Study in Medieval Political Theology*, Ernest Kantorowicz explains that this juridical doctrine of the body and the “superbody” can be traced back to Jesus Christ who is endowed with both a *corpus naturale* and a *corpus mysticum*. The former is the individual body and the latter the collective one, the social body of the Church, from the spiritual sense of religion to the administrative organism (of archbishops, bishops, etc)⁶. Parallel to this, the king has one individual body and a collective one: that of the State. In his political treatise *The Trew Law of Free Monarchy*, James VI of Scotland, future James I of England, uses the body analogy for his theory of kingship:

The proper office of a king towards his subjects agrees very well with the office of the head towards the body and all the members thereof [...] The head cares for the body, so doeth the king for his people.⁷

In *King Lear*, the portent of the Body Politic as symbolically enclosed in the king's body is desecrated. The king rashly divides his kingdom among his daughters while he is still alive, committing a double violation regarding the doctrine: He, first, divests himself of the mystical Body Politic, conferring it on his two daughters and their respective husbands: “I invest you jointly with my power”⁸. He chooses to “retain/ The name and all th'addition to a king” (I.1.130) as he says, therefore merely the material paraphernalia of kingship emptied of its essence. Secondly, he rends the Body Politic in twain. To visualize the absurdity of this decision, Shakespeare makes him ostentatiously take the crown and say: “this coronet part between you” (I.1.133). Ensuing enmity, strife and, eventually death, lead the play to a closure with no prospect of transmission of the Body Politic through

⁵ Kantorowicz, pp. 3-6; p. 314-336; See also Henri Suhamy ed., *Richard II. William Shakespeare* (Paris, Ellipses, 2004), pp. 125-126.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 199-200.

⁷ Quoted in J.H. Burns in *The True Law of Kingship. Concepts of Monarchy in Early Modern Scotland*, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 235.

⁸ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Lear*, ed. Jay L. Halio (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992), I, 1, 124. All further references to this play are from this edition.

lineage. Likewise, in *Richard II*, the theatrical transfer of the crown from the eponymous hero to his cousin Henry Bolingbroke – “here, cousin, seize the crown”⁹ – creates an unsettlingly ambivalent image of both royal vacuity and double kingship¹⁰. Besides, Kantorowicz explains that since only the natural body of the king is subdued by death, it is more appropriate to speak of the “demise” of the king, by which the Body Politic is transferred to another natural body; that of the one who inherits the crown. Kantorowicz articulates it as the “migration of the ‘soul’, that is of the immortal part of kingship, from one incarnation to another”¹¹. In *Richard II*, this transfer or migration of power is staged in a subversive way as the legitimate king is forced to forsake his crown to a usurper:

Here cousin, seize the crown.
 Here cousin,
 On this side my hand, and on that side thine.
 Now is this golden crown like a deep well
 That owes two buckets, filling one another,
 The emptier ever dancing in the air,
 The other down unseen and full of water.
 That bucket down and full of tears am I,
 Drinking my griefs, whilst you mount up on high (IV.1.181-189)

As he strips off his body politic metonymically encompassed in his crown, Richard painfully grapple with the very paradox of the sovereign’s dual nature, impregnable and yet so vulnerable, transcendent and yet so immanently “full of tears”. He is both Richard the king and Richard the man, claiming equal authority over both: “My crown I am, but still my griefs are mine” (IV.1.191). Earlier in the play, maintaining the illusion of impregnability in him, he defies the rebellious army gathered by his cousin brandishing the peculiarity of his natural body: “Not all the waters in the rough rude sea/ Can

⁹ William Shakespeare, *King Richard II*, ed. Peter Ure, (London, New York: Routledge, 1961), IV.1.181. All further references to this play are from this edition.

¹⁰ “The rule is: one king at a time. Here we see two kings- which is impossible. Or do we see no king at all? Both men are bareheaded, and the crown is empty”. Alexander Leggatt, *Shakespeare’s Political Drama. The History Plays and the Roman Plays* (London and New York, Routledge, 1988), p. 67.

¹¹ Ernest H. Kantorowicz, *op. cit.*, p.13

wash the balm off from an anointed king”. (III.2.54-55). Indeed, the sacred oil spread over the king’s body on his coronation day is the closest attribute of monarchical power, next to the rest of the paraphernalia, namely the crown, the scepter and the orb. It seals immortality to the flesh of the king and bestows upon him healing powers, such as the cure of Scrofula which, from the early Middle Ages, in Europe and England, was thought to be dependent on the King’s Touch. In his 1581 work *Apologia Pro Regibus*, the theologian Adam Blackwood describes the anointment of the king as “a symbol of divinity and, as it were, a sacrament”¹². Hence, Richard II fantasizes himself as a supernatural creature in which miraculous powers vanquish and annihilate mortal vulnerability. Indeed, political theology endorsed the idea that succession by right of birth and blood purified the flesh from whatever imperfections. In his *Great Point of Succession*, the Stuart apologist Robert Brady believes that this divine right confers “sublimity” on the receiver of the crown, which, in his words:

Is no ways subject to any human imbecilities of infamy, crime, or the like, because it draweth all imperfections and incapacities whatsoever from the natural body, where-with it is consolidate and as it were consubstantiate¹³.

Accordingly, the flesh of the king is so impregnated with sublimity of the divine right of succession that they become united like one substance, in the same way the blood and body of Christ are transformed into wine and bread in the ritual of the Eucharist. In Shakespeare’s age, the last of the Tudors without an heir, and the first of the Stuarts, the indirect heir, were aware of the urge to deflect the anxiety that the break in the smooth transmission of the Body Politic evoked and to exchange the reality for the fiction regarding bodily imperfection.

¹² Quoted by J.H. Burns in *The True Law of Kingship. Concepts of Monarchy in Early Modern Scotland*, p. 226.

¹³ Robert Brady, quoted by Richard McCoy in *Alterations of State. Sacred Kingship in the English Reformation* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 89; See also Ernest H. Kantorowicz, *op. cit.*, p.13.

2. Art and political ideology: unageing monarchs

“Semper Eadem” or “always the same”¹⁴: this is Elizabeth’s motto that courtiers, portrait-makers, poets and chronicle writers zealously tried to preserve, straining themselves to promote the image of a changeless and unageing queen, unscathed by the ravages of time. History has it that “there were no mirrors at court to reflect the Queen’s decay”¹⁵, unlike Shakespeare’s king Richard II who scrutinizes the wrinkles of his face in the “flatt’ring glass” (IV.1.279) and draws the redundant conclusion: “A brittle glory shineth in this face/As brittle as the glory is the face”(IV.1.287-28). It is no wonder then that the Queen should have been angered by the forty performances given of *Richard II* in 1595 in which she perceived calls for rebellion and for her deposition: “I am Richard II know you that?”, she is reported to have confessed.¹⁶

Moreover, the queen’s gender was problematic in a country still uneasy with female rule and opposition was made vocal by pamphleteers such as the Calvinist John Knox in *The first Blast of The Trumpet Against the Monstruous Regiment of Women* (1588) which describes a woman’s dominion as “repugnant to Nature”¹⁷. However, instead of turning the governance of England over to a male leader by getting married and bearing a child, as her courtiers wished her to do¹⁸, Queen Elizabeth wrought forceful ways to promote a peculiar image of herself and of her body. First, she posited herself as both male and female, beyond gender considerations, and therefore beyond

¹⁴ Carole Levin, *The Heart and Stomach of a King: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania, 1994, p. 2.

¹⁵ Susan Brigden, *New Worlds, Lost Worlds: The Rule of the Tudors 1485-1603*, p. 311.

¹⁶ Henri Suhamy ed., *Richard II. William Shakespeare* (Paris, Ellipses, 2004), p. 9.

¹⁷ “To promote a woman to bear rule, superiority, dominion, or empire above any realm, nation, or city, is repugnant to nature; contumely [*an insult*] to God, a thing most contrary to his revealed will and approved ordinance; and finally, it is the subversion of good order, of all equity and justice.” John Knox, quoted in A. N. McLaren, *Political Culture in The Reign of Elizabeth I. Queen and Commonwealth 1558-1585*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 50.

¹⁸ Carole Levin, *op. cit.*, p. 2-4.

any bodily weakness or lack, but rather as symbol of completion. She famously proclaimed to her people, in a speech that was meant to whet them into chivalric fight against the Spanish foe: "I may have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England, too"¹⁹. Secondly, she fostered the image of herself as the Virgin Queen so as to guard access to her body, turning herself into a mythical superhuman again challenging the all too human gendered categorization. She was celebrated in poems and paintings as Cynthia and Diana, the Greek and Roman virgin goddesses of the hunt (a manly attribute) and the moon (symbol of chastity). Her cult usurped even that of the Virgin Mary as her birthday was celebrated instead of the feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary²⁰. Among the myriad of the iconographic celebrations of the queen is the Rainbow Portrait by Oliver who was a pupil of Elizabeth's favorite court painter, Nicholas Hilliard. She was in her late sixties when this portrait was made, but she is portrayed as youthful or rather ageless²¹. The celestial sphere above her head and, most importantly, the inscription "Non sine sole iris" (no rainbow without the sun) symbolize the Queen's command over nature.²²The identification of the king with the sun or what is termed solar monarchy is a commonplace in medieval and Renaissance Europe and England. The White Rose of the York House as well as the Red Rose of the Lancastrian House are represented in

¹⁹ Carole Levin, *ibid.*, p. 1.

²⁰ Susan Brigden, *op. cit.*, p.311.

²¹ Carole Levin explains that these paintings do have a political function in asserting the Queen's unchanging looks. *op. cit.*, p. 16

²² "The coronation robes are replaced by a low-cut bodice (again) signifying maidenhood; the masque like headdress is surmounted by the crescent moon in reference to the virgin goddess Diana; pearls, further emblems of chastity, dangle from her headdress, hair, ears, throat, and wrists; and the bejeweled serpent of wisdom winds around itself on her sleeve (...) In her right hand, Elizabeth is holding a rainbow: Both the illumination of her face and chest and the inscription "Non sine sole iris" (no rainbow without the sun) make clear that Elizabeth represents the sun". Susan Frye, *Elizabeth I. The Competition for Representation*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 102.

heraldry as suns, known as “rose-en-soleil”²³. Becoming an essential metaphor in Elizabethan and Jacobean art, the sun reinforces the idea of monarchy as divine since it offers a visual image of “Sol Invictus” or “Invincible Sun”, the Roman God. In his *Basilikon Doron* (1599), the royal gift he offers to his son, James VI compares the body of the king to the sun, receiving light from God and, like a prismatic mediator, irradiating it to people.²⁴

Pressed to relinquish his throne by his Lancastrian cousin Henry Bolingbroke, the Yorkist Richard II appears like “a blushing discontented sun” (III.3.63) overshadowed by a far more blazing sun: “O that I were a mockery king of snow, / Standing before the sun of Bolingbroke, / To melt myself away in water-drops” (IV.1.260-262). The sun-king was part of the doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings that James I made central to his rule.²⁵ Indeed, no other British monarch insisted on the divine nature of the ruler the way James I did. The body analogy by which the king is head of the nation (which makes up the limbs) has its correspondence at the level of the macrocosm: the king is also *Parens Patriae* or father of the nation-family and *Rex Imago Dei*, the incarnation of God on earth. In his famous speech to Parliament in 1610, he relies on the Bible for his claim to godhead: “In the scriptures kings are called gods and so their power after a certain relation compared to the divine power”. Hence, just like their creator, kings, in James’ words, can “make and unmake their subjects (...) accountable to none but God only”²⁶. In almost all

²³ See Vaughan Hart, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts*, London and New York, Routledge, 1994, pp. 155-156.

²⁴ “Remember then that this glistening worldly glory of kings, is given to them by God, to teach them to preasse, so to glisten and shine before their people in all works of sanctification and righteousness, that their persons as bright lamps of godliness and virtue, may, going in and out before their people, give light to all their steps”. King James VI of Scotland, *Basilikon Doron*, quoted in Vaughan Hart, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

²⁵ “Solar imagery expressed the monarch’s central place in Platonic sphere or macrocosm and aggrandized “hierarchy of the court” into “a reflection of celestial order”. Vaughan Hart, *ibid*, p.157.

²⁶ J. R. Tanner, *Constitutional Documents of the Reign of James I. A. D.1603-1625*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1960, p. 15.

his portraits, he is deified in a fashion his son Charles I is to be and is to irritate John Milton²⁷, his body “sit(ing) upon God’s throne”, the way he describes kings in that same speech to parliament²⁸, afloat a celestial cloud surrounded by angels offering him the royal attributes. “The Apotheosis of James I” by Peter Paul Rubens is one of the several replicas of his divinization displayed on the ceiling of the Banqueting House in London. That angels protect monarchs and plead for their causes is fictitious truth strongly believed in by the Tudors and the Stuarts and which Shakespeare echoes in his political drama. Indeed, Richard II projects a morality play-like strife in which godly forces will stand by his side and keep him immune from any harm from Bolingbroke’s evil forces:

For every man that Bolingbroke hath pressed
To lift shrewd steel against our golden crown,
God for his Richard hath in heavenly pay
A glorious angel: then if angels fight,
Weak men must fall, for heaven still guards the right. (III, 2)

However, despite his faithful representation of sacred kingship in his history plays and some of his tragedies, Shakespeare does question the disproportionate height to which the king’s mystical body was taken during his age. Dramatizing them as tragic heroes, Shakespeare makes kings ponder over and even reconsider the ancestral juridical doctrine of the king’s two bodies which has something of a “legal fiction” as Kantorowicz formulates it.²⁹

When the mad Lear boasts that he is “every inch a king” (IV.5.03) and ostentatiously declares “I am a king./ Masters, know you that?”(IV.5.190-191), he seems less to assert than to question and even deride monarchical authority, garbed in fantastical ideologies of perfection. Dispossessed of his power as well as of his sanity, cast out in the storm in the company of beggars, Lear now realizes how

²⁷ In *A Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*, Milton expressed his revulsion against monarchies where “a king must be adored like a Demigod”. Quoted in William Riley Parker, *Milton: A Biography. Volume I*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996 (1st edition 1968), p. 544-545.

²⁸ J. R. Tanner, *Ibid.*

²⁹ Ernest Kantorowicz, *op. cit.*, p.42.

illusory the aura and the pomp in which he has been enveloped are. He bitterly comes to terms with his real identity; that of a mortal man whose body can experience the blows of cold weather. It is therefore the immanent experience of his senses and flesh, where no consubstantiation with sublimity has occurred, that humbles him: “They told me I was everything; ’tis a lie, I am not ague-proof” (I.5.101). His confession echoes Henry V’s who addresses “thrice gorgeous ceremony”³⁰, which he also parodies as “idol ceremony” (IV.1.237), and questions its worth and power: “What kind of god art thou, that suffer’st more/Of mortal griefs than do thy worshippers? (...) Think’st thou the fiery fever will go out/With titles blown from adulation?”(IV.1.238-239/250-251). This acute awareness that underneath ceremony and pomp, there lie frailty and mortality shows in Richard II’s and King Lear’s moments of introspection. Indeed, the former is torn between public ceremony that imposes mysticism and immortality on him and makes him indulge in hyperbolic fantasies about his name and his flesh as being, respectively, “a God’s name”(III.3.146) and “brass impregnable”(III.2.167), and private moments in which he is confronted with his genuine self. He confesses to his closest servants in a moment of sudden recognition, pointing at the real nature of his body: “I live with bread like you, feel want,/Taste grief, need friends – subjected thus/ How can you say to me, I am a king? (III.2.175-177). After much resistance, he ends up acknowledging the defeat of false divine nature by the undeniably all too human being. Disrobing himself of all the pageantry of kingship, he theatrically lays bare his bodily attributes which compellingly defeat the mystical ones³¹:

With mine own tears I wash away my balm,
With mine own hands I give away my crown,
With mine own tongue deny my sacred state,
With mine own breath release all duteous oaths. (IV.1.207-210)

³⁰ W. Shakespeare, *Henry V*, in *The Complete Works*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), IV.1.263. All further references to this play are from this edition.

³¹ “He (Richard II) does more than violate ceremony; he perverts it, even parodies it”. Alexander Leggatt, *op. cit.*.p. 68.

Feeling isolated with no “seconds” (IV.5.186) to confer due ceremony onto him, Lear improvises a new function for himself, cynically aware of his frail condition which makes the doubling of his bare identity – “a man” – compellingly relevant: “Why, this would make a man a man of salt,/ To use his eyes for garden water-drops”(IV.5.187-188). His tears are more forceful than his balm as they “do scald like molten lead” (IV.6.45).

If Queen Elizabeth imposed censorship of the deposition scene in *Richard II*, the text reappeared in its complete form in 1608, under James I. The Stuart monarch would not have been thwarted in his assumptions about sacred kingship for the first time. Being offered the first performance of *King Lear* in 1606 at Hampton Court, he must have certainly felt at any rate uneasy by the rather irreverently blunt description Lear gives of the beggar Tom with whom he identifies: “Thou art the thing itself. Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare forked animal as thou art” (III.4.95-97). If no historical records give evidence as to James I’s reaction to a Lear-like royal nature, Elizabeth’s last speech to her parliament bears a Richard and a Lear-like stamp: “What am I as of myself, without the watchful providence of almighty God, other than a poor silly woman, weak and subject to many imperfections, expecting as you do a future judgment?”³². She was in the mood that an anonymous artist captured and painted in 1600. The work is a piece of *vanitas* with a title that stands at odds with what it features: “the Queen in a Petrarchan Triumph for Eternity”. Indeed, in this painting, she is wan and weary as Time, embodied in an Old Man, waits by her with his scythe with which he reaps people’s lives, and more conspicuously, a skeleton stands close to her, signaling her impending Death³³. Richard II formulates a generic meditation for such royal memento mori:

Within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king
Keeps Death his court and there the antic sits,
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,

³² Quoted in Susan Brigden, *op. cit.*, p. 357.

³³ <http://cyberingdemocracy.com/elizabeth-tudor-portrait>

Allowing him a breath, a little scene,
To monarchize, be fear'd and kill with looks,
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
As if this flesh which walls about our life,
Were brass impregnable, and humour'd thus
Comes at the last and with a little pin
Bores through his castle wall, and farewell king! (III.2.160-170)

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