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Jean-Christophe Mayer

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Providence and Divine Right in the English Histories

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The plays containing the most allusions to religion in the whole of the Shakespearean corpus are the dramatist's English history plays – the ten or so plays that encompass the reigns of six medieval English monarchs, with the exception of *Henry VIII*, which partly covers that of the second Tudor king.¹ Moreover, as a genre, the history play, almost by essence, invites conjectures about time and destiny. This has been accentuated by the way critics have grouped some of the works together as tetralogies (that is, sets of four plays) – those dealing with the unstable events in England and France between 1399 and 1485. Thus, the term 'First Tetralogy' has often been used to describe Shakespeare's first four English history plays written in or around the early 1590s – *1 Henry VI*, *2 Henry VI*, *3 Henry VI*, and *Richard III*. The 'Second Tetralogy' includes *Richard II*, *1 and 2 Henry IV*, and *Henry V*, plays composed in the second half of the 1590s.

Viewing these works as tetralogies has been productive in the sense that it has emphasized clear cyclical or serial elements in them.² Yet the groupings can cause confusions. Though composed first the 'First Tetralogy' describes historical events that *followed* the 'Second Tetralogy' (the latter would be a 'prequel' in modern terms) and *1 Henry VI* was composed after *2 and 3 Henry VI*. More to the point, 'tetralogical thinking' can lead to teleological interpretations of Shakespeare's plays. Two works by E.M.W. Tillyard in particular, *The Elizabethan Picture* (1943) and *Shakespeare's History Plays* (1948), exerted a lasting influence over Shakespeare studies.³ Tillyard argued that there was a teleological and providential Tudor myth of history running through the two tetralogies. According to him, Shakespeare had found this myth in the English chronicles. They allegedly demonstrated that

the deposition and subsequent murder of Richard II, an anointed sovereign appointed by divine right, was the act that triggered divine retribution. It led to civil war and dynastic conflicts over generations until the nation was saved by the Tudors, or more precisely by God's providential agent, the future Henry VII (Henry, Earl of Richmond), who defeated Richard III at the battle of Bosworth in 1485.

It is true that Shakespeare probably used Edward Halle's providentialist and pro-Tudor *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustrious Families of Lancaster and York* (1548) in the original (his influence can be felt at times in the *Henry VI* plays), even if his main source for his historical drama remained the 1587 edition of Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*. It is undeniable that the playwright imported providential ideas and themes into his works, but, as we shall see, even his *Henry VI* plays, supposedly influenced by Halle's tendentious *Union*, do not simply act out a divine plan.

What has to be borne in mind is that Shakespeare's principal source, the 1587 edition of Holinshed's *Chronicles*, reflected the work of a consortium of five men who did not all hold the same religious or political beliefs.⁴ In their analyses of the *Chronicles* modern historians have pointed out that the language of providentialism is never totally consistent, as the causation of historical events is frequently attributed to a mix of chance, misfortune, fate, or providence.⁵ In effect, Shakespeare used a 'polyvalent' text⁶ and 'a profoundly unstable and fractured one, mirroring the incomplete victories and defeats of various parties in the battles for the soul of the nation'.⁷

Therefore, the chronicles offered dramatists like Shakespeare much miscellaneous material to be shaped and many shadowy figures to be turned into engaging characters. Their world, like that of Shakespeare's plays, was not a godless universe, even if the chroniclers never provide definitive or dependable answers to the workings of history. It was perhaps the silences inside the paradoxically rich narrative of the chronicles that Shakespeare wished to

probe for the sake of his religiously disoriented audiences, who lived in a country that needed to rebuild and explore its links with its Catholic past in order to get to grips with its place in history and Christendom.

Often tied together by a number of medieval and Tudor historians and lawyers, Providence and its connection to sovereignty and politics appears to have concerned Shakespeare specifically. When building the plots of his history plays it is easy to imagine that he needed to investigate the forces animating situations and characters alike. Not only was he interested in the unfolding of history, but also in how political power constructed itself dramatically (and often paradoxically) with the help of religious discourse. He anatomised rulers' so-called special relationship to Providence and to the divine. Shakespeare's potentates appeal differently to their 'divine rights' and the staging of their verbal and political strategies was a way for the dramatist to instil a tragic lyricism into his histories. In what follows, we shall focus first on sovereignty, revelation and the question of Providence and then we shall move on to divine right, which, as suggested, is a closely connected notion. Building on what we learnt in the first two parts, and beyond the chronicles and Tudor political theory, we shall explore what sacred kingship may have meant for Shakespeare and his audiences. In the course of this chapter, our main corpus will be the English history plays (the two tetralogies, *King John* and *Henry VIII*), but also other works, such as *Hamlet*, which shed useful light on our central topic.

Sovereignty, Revelation and the Question of Providence

1 and 2 Henry VI multiply allusions to the supernatural and repeatedly point to apparent signs of God's presence. Nonetheless, so-called expressions of divine Providence turn out to be misleading in most cases. Shakespeare in fact stages characters – sovereigns or top

politicians – who are prone to interpret signs hastily, incompletely or superficially. A prominent example of superficial misreading is the so-called miracle scene of *2 Henry VI* when the King is hawking with Gloucester and Winchester at St Albans and a citizen interrupts them to call them to witness a miracle: one Simon Simpcox, who was supposedly born blind, has miraculously recovered his sight. Interestingly, as Ronald Knowles remarks, ‘All three sources record that it is Gloucester who is overjoyed at the miracle Shakespeare transfers it to Henry’s pious credulity and contrasts Gloucester’s worldly astuteness here’.⁸ The dramatist thus consciously strayed from his historical sources in this instance to underline Henry’s blind faith which makes him read the falsely blind as truly blind. Indeed, the nation’s leader mistakenly attributes to God what is in fact mere trickery—he swiftly falls for the false miracle: ‘Poor soul, God’s goodness hath been great to thee; / Let never day nor night unhallowed pass, / But still remember what the Lord hath done. (*2H6*, 2.1.83–6)⁹

It is tempting to interpret Gloucester’s ensuing exposure of the false blind man as a proto-Protestant gesture. The source for this story, however, is Thomas More’s *Dialogue of the Veneration and Worship of Images* (1529).¹⁰ Moreover, the Duke of Gloucester himself hardly has time to reap the fruits of his spectacular exposure of the false miracle. He too is blind to the political machinations around him; and these are revealed to us as Buckingham arrives just after the Duke’s triumph, to announce that the Duchess of Gloucester has just been arrested and charged with sorcery and high treason. Thus, the man who set out to expose the false miracle is himself exposed because of his wife’s occult practices, leaving the audience to wonder at the dramatic irony of an episode which has blurred reference points somewhat, shattered confessional certainties and undermined rulers’ insightfulness.

A passage which ties in with this one is the scene of the trial by combat (2.3) between an apprentice by the name of Peter Thump and an armourer called Thomas Horner, the former

having brought a petition against his master ‘for saying that the Duke of York was rightful heir to the crown’ (1.3.23–4). During this scene, which is not devoid of humour – were it not for the ensuing death of the accused – much drinking is done by the supporters of each contestant and by the contestants themselves before the fight. Peter, who kills his master in the fight, is relieved to be alive and certain that he ‘prevailed in right’ (2.3.92). Henry is also convinced that the outcome of the duel reveals God’s will and that divine justice has been done (2 *Henry VI*, 2.3.93–8).

The King thinks he has detected the finger of God in these events and yet York – who is no innocent party in the play – offers the hint of a conflicting interpretation. Were it not for the effects of alcohol, the armourer would perhaps have prevailed over his apprentice: ‘– Fellow, thank God, and the good wine in thy master’s way’ (2.3.89–90). The Duke thus questions in passing the reliability of the interpretation of signs in the play.¹¹ Yet this is not systematically the case in 2 *Henry VI*. There are scenes where Shakespeare seems to cast all ambiguity aside and plays rather with the possibility that signs can sometimes reveal a divine nemesis at work. This is the case when Sir William Vaux comes on stage to tell the King that Winchester is dying and that the Cardinal is delirious, tormented and somewhat blasphemous. Henry interprets this in a moral light almost immediately: ‘Ah, what a sign it is of evil life / Where death’s approach is seen so terrible’ (2*H6*, 3.3.5–6). For once, what we have been shown of the character on stage does not conflict with the King’s interpretation. At the Cardinal’s bedside, Henry (ever hopeful) tries to find signs of repentance and it does not come as much of a surprise when Winchester does not produce the sign that would indicate either his contrition or God’s forgiveness: ‘He dies and makes no sign. O God, forgive him’ (2*H6*, 3.3.29).

As these various passages suggest, Shakespeare is in fact sending conflicting signals. He seems more concerned about opening a debate on the possible interpretation of signs and on

God's degree of involvement in human affairs than about giving tangible answers. Moreover, so-called holy sovereigns, their servants and even their clergymen are not portrayed as active agents of some godly Providence. While the chronicles' often inconsistent or incomplete record of events was no doubt perplexing, the fluctuations of Elizabethan and Jacobean religious alleged orthodoxy may not have been helped Shakespeare and his contemporaries either.

On the face of it, many Protestant writers considered that the Revelation had happened once and for all, that the spirit of God would no longer speak and that one should not seek to know God's intentions, or try to read the signs of any further Revelation of his divine will.¹² One is left to wonder what those writers would have made of Shakespeare's prophecies, those staged omens which – through the agency of drama – often turn out to be true, especially in *2 Henry VI*, but not solely.¹³

In her study of Providence in early modern England, Alexandra Walsham shows that Protestant views on Providence were not clear cut and that it was a subject of discord not only between Catholics and Protestants, but also among Protestants themselves.¹⁴ The view that 'miracles are ceased' may have been proverbial – so much so that the expression would appear in Shakespeare's own *Henry V* (1.1.67), placed somewhat anachronistically in the mouth of the Archbishop of Canterbury – it was nevertheless far from unanimously embraced by all Protestant writers. In fact, it seems that the argument was often used by Protestant controversialists as an expedient way of disarming their Catholic opponents, at the snap of a finger as it were. Protestants were aware that the idea of God's miraculous intervention in human affairs was, after all, part of the Christian heritage they shared with Catholics – even if, of course, most clergymen insisted that real miracles were extremely rare.

For Protestant theologians then, miracles had not quite ceased, even if the Protestant concept of miracle was 'hedged about with a number of significant qualifications. "Special

providences” and miracles were not spontaneous or impromptu interventions; they were events for which God had foreseen the need and built into His plan for humanity before the beginning of time’.¹⁵ Still, the notion of ‘special Providence’ enabled Protestants to get themselves out of a tight corner and combat their opponents on an almost equal polemical footing, especially when they sought to win over those who wavered most in their convictions.¹⁶ Many were indeed hesitant and remained so, like Shakespeare’s Lord Lafeu, who in a much later play – *All’s Well That Ends Well* (first performed in 1603) – would seem to put his faith in ‘special providences’, or indeed miracles: ‘They say miracles are past, and we have our philosophical persons, to make modern and familiar, things supernatural and causeless. Hence is it that we make trifles of terrors, ensconcing ourselves into seeming knowledge, when we should submit ourselves to an unknown fear’ (2.3.1–5).

The use and abuse of ‘special providences’ by Elizabethan controversialists led polemicists onto dire doctrinal ground and did little to restore people’s faith in God’s Providence, as the Almighty appeared strangely factionalized. The exploitation of Providence ultimately went against the evangelical wish to spiritualize human experience by raising it above the level of the supposed harm and charms of witchcraft.¹⁷

Might standing over right, or one faction purporting to embody not only the wishes of the commonwealth, but also the will of God, is Shakespeare’s vision of the medieval English civil wars. Richard Plantagenet, Duke of York, does not live in the fear of his ‘holy’ sovereign, Henry VI. York considers Henry VI an inefficient king, one who is not endowed like himself with the conquering might of a heroic figure, in the (partly pagan) tradition of a Greek mythical hero, or of Christopher Marlowe’s all-mighty and wrathful Tamburlaine:

That head of thine doth not become a crown;

Thy hand is made to grasp a palmer’s staff

And not to grace an awful princely sceptre.
 That gold must round engirt these brows of mine,
 Whose smile and frown, like to Achilles' spear,
 Is able with the change to kill and cure.
 Here is a hand to hold a sceptre up
 And with the same to act controlling laws.
 Give place! By heaven, thou shalt rule no more
 O'er him whom heaven created for thy ruler. (*2 Henry VI*, 5.1.96–105)

If we believe York, the sacred power of kingship is not so much conferred to the king by religion, but by might, by the magic of York's heroic arms ('like to Achilles' spear').

References to the hand (the hero's instrument) largely outnumber those to the crown in the passage. For York, sacred kingship has a concrete and palpable meaning: the sovereign is sacred because it is the sovereign's will and because he has all the means at his disposal to be persuasive. The would-be conqueror king turns the contemplative king into a disoriented pilgrim holding indeed 'a palmer's staff' rather than a royal sceptre.

A later member of the House of York, Richard, Duke of Gloucester (the future Richard III) pictures himself in similar terms. Is he not, after all, 'determinèd to prove a villain' (*Richard III*, 1.1.30) – that is, both a voluntary agent of evil and potentially an instrument of a higher purpose?¹⁸ Moreover, from the outset of another play – *King John* – a disconcerting ambivalence seems to be at work as far as Providence is concerned. In the opening scene, our dramatic interest is immediately aroused when Queen Eleanor in an intriguing aside tells John that God is witness that he is an unlawful king:

KING JOHN

Our strong possession and our right for us.

ELEANOR

Your strong possession much more than your right,

Or else it must go wrong with you and me;

So much my conscience whispers in your ear,

Which none but heaven and you and I shall hear. (1.1.39–43)

Does this mean that God is not on the King's side? Or does it mean that it is God's will that an illegitimate king should reign? These differences were touchy issues when Shakespeare wrote his play.

To go back to *Richard III*, it could be argued that if the Earl of Richmond (the future Tudor king, Henry VII) finally gains the upper hand over Richard, it is not so much because of his right to the crown, or of divine Providence, but because Richard's sacrilegious reign has paved the way for him. Richmond does not really hold more rights to the crown than Richard, who, in passing, is the only elected king in Shakespeare's two tetralogies. Is not Richmond also usurping (as tyrants would) God's prerogative when using his warlike rhetoric: 'All for our vantage. Then in God's name, march! / True hope is swift and flies with swallow's wings; / Kings it makes gods, and meaner creatures kings'. (5.2.22–4)

By the same token, one could claim that Richard, because he is seen by many as the embodiment of supreme evil, exorcises the evils of the English civil wars and allows the houses of Lancaster and York to be united. To some extent, Richmond could be construed as the one who reaps the providential fruits of a dramatic process that has unravelled without him: 'Richmond is something new, something from outside the play's system as we have seen it so far. Yet not altogether so, for in a deeper sense Richard has generated Richmond'.¹⁹ Richmond may claim to be waging a holy war (5.5.206–10), but Shakespeare makes sure that

the scapegoated tyrant too has a voice. Indeed, Richard throws Richmond's arguments back at him, for to him they are imbued with simplistic providentialism. Heaven, and God's Providence, belong to no one: 'Not shine today? Why, what is that to me / More than to Richmond? For the self-same heaven / That frowns on me looks sadly upon him' (5.3.87–89).

As we have seen, there are fragments of providentialism in Shakespeare and a constant (and frequently ironic) attentiveness to the interpretation and processes of legitimisation of human action. Predictively, this dramatic inquisitiveness extends also to potentates' supposed special relationship with divine authority. Prior to investigating Shakespeare's treatment of divine right, it is essential to bear a few contextual elements in mind.

Divine Right: Legal and Constitutional Contexts

The divine right of kings was never a consensual constitutional theory, even during the late medieval ages. It was more akin to a set of various propositions, which evolved through troubled ages and whose aim was to provide some sort of stability from a legal and political point of view. In what is still the best account of the 'theory', *The Divine Right of Kings* (1896, 2nd ed. 1914), John Neville Figgis offers a useful summary of the main characteristics of what never formed a unique concept:

- 1) Monarchy is a divinely ordained institution. . . .
- (2) Hereditary right is indefeasible. . . .
- (3) Kings are accountable to God alone. . . .
- (4) Non-resistance and passive obedience are enjoined by God. . . .²⁰

Each point in Figgis' list was the source of numerous debates among medieval and early Tudor legal theorists. The divine right of kings was certainly not a fixed theory, but rather a shifting body of texts riddled with legal difficulties. Be that as it may, times of political turmoil such as the War of the Roses (the series of civil wars in England fought for possession of the crown from 1455 to 1487) prompted legal specialists to try to redefine and consolidate the much-abused notion of royal sovereignty. John Fortescue, who was Chief Justice of the King's Bench published *De laudibus legum angliae* (1471), which was translated in 1567 by Robert Mulcaster and became the main legal reference work for the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. Fortescue insisted that the king's person was dual but unified. What medieval historian Ernst Kantorowicz famously called 'the curious legal fiction of the "King's Two Bodies"' – the king embodying both a mortal person and an eternal office – stemmed from a series of articulated theological, legal and philosophical discourses which created the illusion that by analogy every ruler was an image of Christ – a mortal but eternal being.²¹

For Fortescue, and depending on the situation, a ruler could be both above and subject to the kingdom's laws. The authority of the sovereign can be 'royal' in the sense that it is the expression of the 'princeis pleasure': 'And suche is the dominion that the civile lawes purport when they saye: The princeis pleasure hath the force of a lawe'.²² Nonetheless, the king's powers are 'political' too, as the monarch must enforce laws that are independent from him: 'But from this mucche differeth the power of a kynge, whose government over his people is politique. For he can neither chaunge lawes without the consent of his subjects, nor yett charge them with straunge impositions agaynst their wylles' (*ibid.*). Despite the potential incompatibility of the two powers entrusted to the king, Fortescue asserted that 'royal' and 'political' powers were indissoluble: '. . . he governeth his people by power not onely roial but also politique' (f. 25v). In other words, a king is subject to the common law, but sovereigns also have exceptional powers, which place them above the law. One can see how

unsustainable Fortescue's arguments could be, especially in the late Elizabethan and Jacobean periods when the king's prerogatives were such a controversial subject.

Early modern monarchy would have been an institutional miracle if the union of these two almost incompatible powers (royal and political) were perfectly embodied in a mortal and fallible human being. It is no wonder that ultimately, and as will be seen later in this chapter, the person of the mortal sovereign tried to hide, or progressively disappeared behind the sacredness of the institution.

Divine Right in Shakespeare

According to Figgis and, well before him, to medieval and Tudor theorists, hereditary right was supposed to be an emanation of divine right, all laws being of divine origin. Nonetheless, Shakespeare's stage underlined bigoted and manipulative uses of divine Providence. The dramatist's exploration of divine right is circumspect, occasionally biting, and conscious of how political discourse can feed on religion to create its mystique or mysticism.

Genealogy and hereditary rights are bywords for political wrangles. Shakespeare's drama suggests that any notion of an 'heir apparent' is visibly a sham or an argument constructed after the fact, just like Falstaff's comical justification in *1 Henry IV*: 'was it for me to kill the heir apparent? Should I turn upon the true prince? . . . The lion will not touch the true prince. Instinct is a great matter. I was now a coward on instinct' (2.4.222–5). The truth is that Falstaff really mistook Prince Hal – the heir apparent – for a menacing thief to whom he did not oppose any resistance.

In fact, there are few direct references to the divine right of kings in Shakespeare's history plays. This was not only because the alleged 'theory' was an amalgamation of frequently contradictory and partly impenetrable texts, but also because Shakespeare was aware that the

subject was touchy and that it could only be treated obliquely. Queen Elizabeth had produced no heir and the question of her succession continued to be open. Direct mentions are usually found in the margins of the main dramatic action of the play. In *Richard II* ‘Old John of Gaunt’ (1.1.1) vehemently denounces the kingdom’s decadence, but refuses to take part in the action by avenging his brother Woodstock:

God’s is the quarrel, for God’s substitute,
His deputy anointed in His sight,
Hath caused his death, the which if wrongfully
Let heaven revenge, for I may never lift
An angry arm against His minister (1.2.37–41)

In the same play, the Bishop of Carlisle holds on to some kind of divine right, but his words, which go counter to the political reality around him, only stress the powerlessness of Richard II – the news of his abdication having reached us a few lines before (4.1.107–10):

And shall the figure of God’s majesty,
His captain, steward, deputy, elect,
Anointed, crownèd, planted many years,
Be judged by subject and inferior breath . . . (4.1.125–8)

They also cause him to be arrested on the spot by Northumberland for capital treason (4.1.150–1). Dramatic irony is at its height here with Carlisle bent on defending the divine rights of a monarch who has just renounced a sanctified kingship. In *King John* references to the divine right of kings are less specific and appear to be just one argument among others to

counter the papacy and defend national sovereignty. Responding to Cardinal Pandulf, the Pope's legate, John answers emphatically:

What earthy name to interrogatories
 Can task the free breath of a sacred king?
 Thou canst not, cardinal, devise a name
 So slight, unworthy, and ridiculous
 To charge me to an answer, as the Pope. (3.1.147–51)

Richard II: From Royal Mystique to Spiritual Lyricism

But what of *Richard II*? Was this not the play where the notions of Providence and sacred kingship were debated most? Moreover, even if the divine right of kings remains mostly backstage, *Richard II* is akin at times to a tragic lyric on the destiny of kings and their sacred aura. Arguably, and well beyond considerations of religious doctrine or legal theory, Shakespeare saw in the history of Richard of Bordeaux material which he could use to stage the tragic but spectacular demise of a sovereign in sacred office.

In some regards, Richard II can be compared to Henry VI for his idealism. Yet, in the case of Richard, it is important to distinguish between elements of royal mystique, with which he consciously surrounds himself to create a personal mythology during his fall, and a humble sort of lyricism that lends a genuinely tragic dimension to the character.

On his return from Ireland, Richard is no longer the reckless character he was at the beginning of the play. From Act 3 onwards, the king is more and more dependent on the mystique of his sovereign role. He makes few, if any, political decisions and prefers to focus on the elaboration of his myth of sacred kingship, which he sees as a source of power. He

wraps himself in the idealistic belief of a divinely-sanctioned and untouchable sovereignty. Likewise, Henry VI had almost completely cut himself off from the temporal world. Nevertheless, contrary to Richard, Shakespeare's contemplative and saintlike king had little faith in the power of his ideals on the political real. In *Richard II*, the sovereign lives an impossible fantasy dream and as his self-serving mystique grows, his political sway diminishes drastically. Using an implicitly providential argument, the Bishop of Carlisle encourages Richard in his beliefs and goes so far as to equate sanctified kingship with political might: 'Fear not, my lord. That power that made you king / Hath power to keep you king in spite of all' (3.2.27–8). Comforted by such arguments and despite the warnings of some of his followers, the king continues to perfect his myth in a passage that has become famous:

Not all the water in the rough rude sea
 Can wash the balm off from an anointed king.
 The breath of worldly men cannot depose
 The deputy elected by the Lord.
 For every man that Bullingbrook 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. (3.2.54–62)

This passage has long been interpreted as proof of Shakespeare's belief in the divine right of kings, regardless of the fact that it is a personal statement made by a fictional character, who at this point in the play, has very few cards left to play. Neither is Richard the

embodiment of the traditional medieval sovereign here. He pieces together legal and Christian elements, which, as we have shown, never formed an orthodox and consensual whole.

Richard's Providence is indeed 'special', but only in the sense that it is self-serving ('God for His Richard'). What is expressed is closer to an absolutist conception of monarchy, according to which there is no difference whatsoever between the private person of the king and his body politic, that is, the mystical body of the state.

Richard's allegedly sanctified personal myth will of course suffer a severe blow as he is ultimately defeated on the political field. Yet he is far from vanquished on the linguistic terrain. It could be claimed that there is a potent spiritual side to his tragic lyricism, especially when he becomes aware that royal mystique is fundamentally hollow and that the king is but a man who should be humbled by existence.²³ Alongside Richard's histrionics, there are glimpses in him of intense lucidity and of more genuine spirituality. When Richard asks his queen to go to France and retire to a religious convent, his words come close to recalling the allegorical and redemptive spiritual journey of *Everyman*, in the late fifteenth-century morality play of the same name: 'Our holy lives must win a new world's crown / Which our profane hours here have stricken down' (5.1.24–5).

These fleeting moments should not be confused with others where Richard stage-manages his own deposition and the supposed sacrilegious nature of the act. At no point do his words have an impact on the action of the play. His self-interested 'theory' of the divine right of kings has more of an effect on consciences – the audience's, but also his successor's, the future Henry IV.

More broadly, *Richard II* is a work which explores the idealism attached to kingship. It shows its political use, but points to its untenable, or at least frailer aspects. It was not fortuitous that none of the editions printed during Elizabeth I's reign (1558–1603) contained the scene at the heart of Act 4, scene 1 (lines 155–319) in which King Richard is deposed by

his own Parliament.²⁴ The passage appeared in the fourth quarto edition of the play published in 1608. With the queen's succession still remaining unresolved in the 1590s, the story of Richard II served as a way for polemicists of all denominations to debate issues like the rights of succession to the throne of various candidates and questions such as who had the authority to appoint monarchs.²⁵

On 4 August 1601, as she perused some of the historical archives of the Tower of London, presented to her by her Antiquarian, William Lambard, documents pertaining to Richard II's distant reign are said to have carried for her an immediate contemporary resonance: 'so her Majestie fell upon the reign of King Richard II. saying, "I am Richard II. know ye not that?"', adding 'He that will forget God, will also forget his benefactors; this tragedy was played 40^{tie} times in open streets and houses'.²⁶

The Mysteries of State

If Providence proved to be impenetrable (who could claim to know God's will after all?) and too easily appropriated to serve different agendas, and if divine right turned out to be a series of texts that could expose the inevitable frailties of the natural body of the sovereign, how could the early modern state maintain its legitimacy and find stability?

At the turn of the seventeenth century, some legal theorists developed the idea that to hide the king behind his official mask, or sacred office, would give sovereignty more leeway and authority. In this view, the ruler is no Machiavellian figure in disguise, but like God, his will is inscrutable and his works happen, while he remains concealed. In other words, the sovereign becomes a *deus absconditus*, a distant God. What would be known as the 'Mysteries of State', was a rational effort to endow rulers with their own sphere of action, one that remained mostly out of view. In a society still deeply imbued with spirituality, a theory

that eventually led to the constitution of the modern state apparatus had to be based on religious discourse. In a 1606 treatise entitled *A Comparative Discourse of the Bodies Natural and Politique*, the lawyer Edward Forset introduced these new ideas through the traditional biblical theme of the Fall of Adam, the latter having usurped God's prerogative by seeking to taste the forbidden apple of knowledge. Forset states that 'it is easie to offend in the curiositie of inquiring into State-secrets; there is even in that kind also a forbidden Apple. And it hath ever been reckoned an audaciousnes not to be digested, to intrude with temeritie, where restraint hath placed a crosse barre. If every bodie must know all, counsell were no counsell. The bodie politique as the naturall, is whole and close chested . . .'.²⁷

Hence is the mortal body of the monarch theoretically entitled to be protected and legitimized by his sacred office. *Hamlet's* King Claudius is one who dreams of such a protective veil, or 'hedge', between him and those who would pry into his guilty secrets: 'There's such divinity doth hedge a king / That treason can but peep to what it would, / Acts little of his will. . . .' (4.5.124–6). The only sovereign in the whole of Shakespeare's history plays who appears to have achieved the union of the king's two bodies is Henry V. However, Shakespeare's Henry is someone who has become a prisoner of his own office, or body politic. The king's humane side disappears behind his role as charismatic ruler, which he is forced to play. For a moment, before the battle of Agincourt, he tries to lay aside his office to plead his case before the most sceptical of his soldiers. Still in disguise though, he speaks of the king's personal self: 'All his senses have but human conditions. His ceremonies laid by, in his nakedness he appears but a man . . .' (*Henry V*, 4.1.99–100). These lines have trouble hiding the fact that as a king he has cut himself off from the rest of mankind and that his inhumanity is the price he has to pay for self-preservation, that is, for disappearing behind his body politic.²⁸

Shakespeare's only play on the reign of a Tudor monarch, *Henry VIII* (first performed in 1613 under the reign of the Stuart King James I) is equally circumspect. On the face of it, the work appears to be a fable on absolutism with a king who is remote, almost visibly absent, and who constantly hides his real intentions. On closer scrutiny, Henry is no *deus absconditus*, nor is he a prime mover on stage. In fact, dramatic language partly escapes him and numerous scenes are rife with rumours about him. The King is not aloof because he is dealing with mysteries of state. On the contrary, what we witness is the journey of a ruler attempting to reconquer power after severely neglecting his duties. According to some, the kingdom is led by a man who has lost all vision: ' . . . Heaven will one day open / The king's eyes, that so long have slept, upon / This bold bad man' (2.2.40–2, alluding to Cardinal Wolsey).

By the end of the play, and despite his persistently limited control over dramatic language, the King has sought to master the visible world. He has been self-consciously on show as a sovereign during several ceremonies – the coronation of Anne Boleyn and the baptism of the future Elizabeth I (4.1.35–118 and 5.4.1–76). Wearing a more official and public mask, he needs to see, as well as be seen. With almost divine eyes he spies on his ministers and his courtiers. He is not behind the veil of majesty, but '*at a window above*' (5.2.18.1), in order to come at last to Thomas Cranmer's rescue, like a *deus ex machina*, when the reformist archbishop is accused of heresy (5.2.156-214).

Conclusion

A legal theorist like Edward Forset might argue that it is possible and advisable to hide the mortal body of rulers behind the sacredness of their office. Shakespeare's stages of history show us that the establishment of kingship on any type of sacred authority (Providence, divine

right, or ‘mysteries of state’) is a source of conflict. His history plays not only thrive dramatically on contention, but also make the contradictions and silences of his chronicle sources resound meaningfully and problematically. His drama does not transgress or adhere to an orthodox divine theory of sovereignty. It seeks to establish a dialogue between an ideologically conflicted past and a religiously and politically troubled present. It stages characters shaping their earthly and spiritual journeys with shreds of shifting religious, theological and legal discourse. No metaphysical certainty is ever expressed, but as Shakespeare’s sovereigns reflect on their journeys, a spiritual sense of destiny often emerges from their dilemmas.

Notes

¹ I have compiled these statistics with the help of M. Spevack’s *Harvard Concordance to Shakespeare* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973). The play which contains the most allusions is . . . *Richard III!*

² See, for instance, Nicholas Grene, *Shakespeare’s Serial History Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

³ E.M.W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan Picture* ([S.l.]: Chatto & Windus, 1943) and *Shakespeare’s History Plays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1948). See also Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare’s ‘Histories’: Mirrors of Elizabethan Policy* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1947) for more teleological interpretations.

⁴ Ian W. Archer, Felicity Heal, and Paulina Kewes, ‘Prologue’, in Paulina Kewes, Ian W. Archer, and Felicity Heal (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Holinshed’s Chronicles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. xxix.

⁵ Alexandra Walsham, ‘Providentialism’, in Kewes, Archer, and Heal (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Holinshed’s Chronicles*, pp. 432–3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 442.

⁷ Peter Marshall, ‘Religious Ideology’, in Kewes, Archer, and Heal (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Holinshed’s Chronicles*, p. 416. In this light, Annabel Patterson’s argument that Holinshed’s *Chronicles* conveyed proto-

democratic middle class values appears overstated. See her *Reading Holinshed's Chronicles* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) and her much cited article 'Rethinking Tudor Historiography', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 92 (1993), esp. pp. 205–6.

⁸ William Shakespeare, *King Henry VI, Part 2*, ed. R. Knowles, Arden 3 (London: Thomson Learning, 2001 [1999]), p. 201 (note to line 65).

⁹ All quotations of Shakespeare are taken from the New Cambridge Shakespeare edition.

¹⁰ See G. Bullough (ed.), *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, 8 vols. (London: Routledge; New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), vol. 3, p. 90.

¹¹ As Ronald Knowles remarks, 'If this is Providence, it is of a kind difficult to credit, except in the simple mind of this king' ('The Farce of History: Miracle, Combat, and Rebellion in *2 Henry VI*', *Yearbook of English Studies*, 21 (1991), p. 169).

¹² See D.P. Walker, *Unclean Spirits, Possession and Exorcism in France and England in the Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries* (London: Scolar Press, 1981), p. 17.

¹³ See Bullough (ed.), *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, vol. 3, p. 93.

¹⁴ Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 228–9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 229–30.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 280.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

¹⁸ Anthony Hammond has indeed remarked that 'the verb can be read in the passive voice, implying that Richard's role has been determined by providence' (W. Shakespeare, *King Richard III*, ed. A. Hammond, Arden 2 (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 127, n.).

¹⁹ Alexander Leggatt, *Shakespeare's Political Drama: The History Plays and the Roman Plays* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 49.

²⁰ John Neville Figgis, *The Divine Right of Kings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914 [1896]).

²¹ Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies, A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. vii, 336–83. See also Marie Axton, *The Queen's Two Bodies, Drama and the Elizabethan Succession* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1977), esp. p. 14.

²² John Fortescue, *A Learned Commendation of the Politique Lawes of Englande*, trans. Robert Mulcaster

(London: Rychard Tottill, 1567), f. 26r. .STC: 11194. Further references to this work will be in the text.

²³ See *Richard II*, 3.2.160–2 and 164–8.

²⁴ These were: Q1 (1597), Q2 (1598), Q3 (1598).

²⁵ See, among the more audacious, the English Jesuit Robert Persons's *A Conference About the Next Succession to the Crowne of England* ([Antwerp], 1594). STC.: 19398. The work was printed in 1594 (under the pseudonym of R. Doleman); it began to appear in England in 1595, despite the government's efforts to stem its circulation.

²⁶ Cited in J. Nichols, *Bibliotheca Topographica Britannica*, 10 vols. (New York: AMS Press, 1968 [facsimile reprint of 1780–1790 ed.]), vol. 1, appendix 7, p. 525.

²⁷ Edward Forset, *A Comparative Discourse of the Bodies Natural and Politique* (London: John Bill, 1606), p. 98. STC: 11188.

²⁸ See Anne Barton, 'The King Disguised: Shakespeare's *Henry V* and the Comical History', in Joseph G. Price (ed.), *The Triple Bond: Plays, Mainly Shakespearean, in Performance* (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975), pp. 102–3.

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